

University of Colorado, Boulder CU Scholar

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Honors Program

Spring 2014

The Bundle

Stephen Mirabito

University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Recommended Citation

Mirabito, Stephen, "The Bundle" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 166.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.

The Bundle

A Creative Fiction Thesis

By
Stephen Mirabito



Creative Writing Department
University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended April 9th, 2014

Thesis Advisor

Julius Edwin Rivers | Department of English



Defense Committee

Marcia Douglas | Department of English

Jason Potter | Department of Philosophy

Further Reading List

- Ambrose, Stephen E. *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. Print.
- Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977. Print.
- Hume, David. "Section VI: Of Personal Identity." *Mnstate.edu*. Minnesota State University Moorhead. Web. 22 March, 2014. <<http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/TreatiseI.iv.vi.htm>>
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. Print.
- Mitchell, David. *Black Swan Green*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1997. Print.
- Wolff, Tobias. *The Night in Question: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1996. Print.

Author's Note

Some of this story is autobiographical. However, it does not in any way purport to represent the views, opinions, or practices of the Boy Scouts of America.

Boy Scout Oath (or Promise)

*On my honor I will do my best
To do my duty to God and my country
and to obey the Scout Law;
To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong,
mentally awake, and morally straight.*

Boy Scout Law

*A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly,
courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty,
brave, clean, and reverent.*

Scout Motto

Be Prepared



Citizenship in the Nation



Fire Safety



Emergency Preparedness

Chapter One

Fourth of July: Old Settler's Park, Round Rock, TX

When they arrive in the evening, fireworks are already burning the air. A shining row of pickup trucks pull into the grass alongside one other and they let their tailgates down. The passengers clamber out and dig beer cans out of their coolers. Bags of junk food—barbecue chips, Tropical Starburst, and Peanut-Butter Mnm's—wait to be opened. They peel them apart and lick the grease from their hands. A symphonic band performs the Star Spangled Banner in front of a fifty-foot wide American Flag. The soundtrack sets the background for an old-fashioned firetruck which glides along the concrete path. A bearded man inside waves to the passing people and all around him, hundreds of mini-American flags flutter in ensemble. Across the field, a kid lights an M80 and the explosion shakes the ground. An old couple sits next to one another eating watermelon slices larger than their faces. Children squeal as they reach the top of a Ferris wheel and see the whole festival below their kicking feet. A color guard has formed on top of the hill and their guns are silhouetted by the explosions in the background. The park smells of gunpowder and deep fat fryers. A boy struggles to throw a rock downrange a sandpit; his sister giggles and another boy hurls one twice as far. Several men on horses perform a mock battle between cowboys and Indians. The cowboys kill the savages and save their poor, helpless damsels.

Viewing this spectacle: D.H. stands in the grass next to the Boyfriend's car, while the Boyfriend gets his wallet from the dash. The Boyfriend grabs D.H. by the hand so they can get

funnel cakes. He insists on holding his hand even though he's twelve, and is perfectly fine on his own. They stand in line for a few minutes, and D.H. paces back and forth. He isn't used to being around this many people. A shirtless man walks by with a forest of hair across his distended stomach. He tosses a beer can in the vicinity of the trash and yells for someone named Deb. D.H. stomps his feet and squirms, but the Boyfriend doesn't notice; he just tugs his arm. D.H. has to pee, like super bad, but he doesn't see a port-a-potty anywhere, and he's a thirty minute drive from home.

"Where's mom?"

"Huh?"

"Is she coming?"

The Boyfriend almost answers, but it's his turn in line. He turns to the bubbly teenage girl behind the register. She waves and wishes them a happy Fourth of July. The Boyfriend smiles and hands her a twenty.

"Two funnel cakes and a Keystone."

She takes the money and the register makes a ding when it opens. An Air Bomb screams across the sky. D.H. clamps his hands over his ears but he can still hear the whine of the burning firecracker.

"Oh man—" The Boyfriend looks for it, but only sees the tail of its trajectory. "Right above us . . ." The bubbly cashier girl hands him his funnel cake and beer. He stuffs a five into the tip jar, then balances the cakes on his right hand. He gulps down half of his beer.

"All righty then."

They move to a bench and begin eating. D.H. isn't squirming anymore and his head's in his hands. The Boyfriend looks over at him, but D.H. avoids eye contact. He doesn't eat his funnel cake.

"So your mother and I talked about it. You don't have to go to camp if it's *really* that bad."

"Okay."

"Okay? Well, what does that mean?"

D.H. sees a man with red, white, and blue face paint, wearing American flag pants. He balances on stilts twice his height. The man wavers for a second but then rights himself. A crowd of kids start kicking the wooden stilts to throw him off balance; they squeal in delight.

"Oh bud, really?"

D.H. shrugs.

The Boyfriend looks underneath the table. "Damn," he whispers.

D.H.'s pants are soaked through, the wet spot around his crotch expanding towards his thighs. He shifts in his seat and looks at the man on the stilts again.

"All right, wait here." The Boyfriend stands up from the table and walks off a few feet. Turning, he sees D.H. all by himself. "No hold on, you're coming with." He grabs his hand and leads him through the crowd.

D.H. penguin-walks across the field.

They reach the car, and the Boyfriend digs through all the stuff in his back seat. He finds an old pair of pants. He motions for D.H. and shows him inside. D.H. sits in the backseat, looking over his shoulder.

“Nah, you’re good. I’ll watch.”

“This is weird.”

“No one’s watching. C’mon.”

He squirms out of his pants and pulls on the new ones. They’re much too big, so he rolls up the legs and pulls his belt as tight as he can across his waist. He struggles out of the car and almost trips. He stands up, his new pants twice the width of his body.

“You just look like a clown. Don’t sweat it.” The Boyfriend slaps his hand on the hood of the car. “Looking great, little man.”

D.H. glares at him, so the Boyfriend holds up his hands to plead innocence.

“C’mon D.H. We’re supposed to meet your mother by the ice cream stand.”

They trek back across the field, the Boyfriend dragging D.H. along. D.H. takes long, deliberate steps. When they find their bench, their funnel cake and beer have disappeared.

“What the hell? Where’s the—”

It whizzes by their heads until a *pop!* and the Black Cat bottle rocket explodes right next to D.H.’s foot. He leaps backwards almost falling flat on his back. The Boyfriend catches him.

“Heads!” A few men rush in their direction, their hands full of beer and fireworks. One of them has a cigarette stuck in his mouth and there are tattoos of flames up and down his arms.

“Woah, sorry. That one got away from us.”

“Oh it’s nothing.” The Boyfriend straightens himself and pulls D.H. closer. “It just almost hit us.”

“Right, sorry. . . Hey those pants are a little big on you, don’tcha think?”

D.H. nods.

“Does he talk?”

The Boyfriend starts to turn away—taking D.H. with.

“Hey, lemme make it up to you. Wanna beer?”

“No, I think we’re meeting—”

“Hey we got some more of those black cats too. What’dya think?”

D.H. looks up at the Boyfriend. The Boyfriend is flustered.

“We don’t have any fireworks,” D.H. says.

The Boyfriend nods.

“Okay, real quick then,” Mr. Flame Tattoos says.

They walk to their campsite. The men’ve stacked cans of Natural Light beer in the shape of a pyramid. In front of it lies a recycling bin full of fireworks. Mr. Flame Tattoos hands D.H. a mortar round.

“We’ve got a big tube for that one. Goes up in the air, and boom!” He makes a circle with his hands and blows cigarette smoke through it. “They call that last part ‘the report.’”

They come to a circular tube dug into the ground. There are discarded sparklers and crackle bombs littered across the launch pad. A boy cuts across their path. He waves a strip of Cracker Jacks in his hand, chasing a girl who’s screaming and sprinting away from him. He winds his arm to throw it. The Cracker Jacks ignite mid-flight, hissing and zipping in every direction.

“Set it in there, like this.” Mr. Flame Tattoos helps D.H. lower the mortar round inside. The fuse is long and snakes out of the top of the tube. He sucks on the stub of his cigarette and

flicks the butt into the grass. He pulls another from his pack and lights it. He tosses the lighter to D.H. D.H. grapples with it, trying to flick the metal wheel, but nothing's happening.

"Little harder than that."

D.H. looks back at the Boyfriend. He notices that the Boyfriend has taken a cigarette from one of them and is failing to do a trick with the smoke.

He sees D.H. eyeing him. "Don't tell your mother, okay?" he says. The men start laughing and push the Boyfriend around.

D.H. flicks the wheel with both thumbs and it gives. A flame flickers to life. He holds it up to the fuse.

"Ah, hold on there, not quite—" But it's too late; the fuse has already lit—the flame's too close, and it's already rushing down the tube. D.H. hears a *hiss* and the sparks blow in his face.

The men yell, "Run!" but the Boyfriend can't save D.H. quick enough. The flame on the fuse strikes the base of the mortar shell. It blows right in his face. Smoke and fire erupt out the tube. D.H. stumbles backwards and sees the mortar lifting into the air. There's a moment of silence as it makes its ascent—climbing higher and higher—then it explodes into fiery green, arcing across the sky. All over the park people, toasting the peony-pattern, raising their beers into the air.

"Holy hell, little man, you all right?" Mr. Flame Tattoos gets to him first. The Boyfriend straggles behind.

"I'm fine." D.H. has a bit of ash across his face, and the sparks have burned a few holes in his shirt. D.H. tugs the scout bandana off his neck. He's completely unharmed.

"So metal!" Mr. Flame Tattoos exclaims.

“Thank god,” the Boyfriend chimes in. “Your mother would have crucified me.” The Boyfriend takes the bandana from him and wipes the ash off his face. He sets the bandana back in his hands, somewhat ruined.

“Right on.” Mr. Flame Tattoos marvels at the explosion that has just faded. “Worth every dollar.”

He points at the sooty bandana in D.H.’s hands. “What’re the symbols for?”

“Scouts.”

“Excellent—that’s what I thought. I made eagle, actually.”

D.H is surprised.

“Right? I wouldn’t expect it, either.”

“We go to camp tomorrow.” D.H. tells him.

“Excellent. Always a good time.”

D.H. shrugs.

Mr. Flame Tattoos sucks his cigarette. “No?”

“Everyone’s mean.”

“Nah, fuck ‘em—don’t let them be.”

“Okay.”

“Really. Just beat the shit out of one of them and then you’ll be fine. No one will mess with you after that.”

“Okay.” D.H. stuffs the bandana into his pocket.

“Don’t worry.” Mr. Flame Tattoos pats him on the shoulder. “Be better than them.” The man starts digging through his pack of goodies. He sets a handful of Cracklers next to a fountain

the size of small table. The fountain says “Screamin’ Meemie” in black and red lettering across its side.

“How many packs are in your troop?”

“There’s six,” D.H. says.

“Six! Mine was small—we were just one big pack. Cobra Pack.”

“There’s a lot of scouts in mine. So they have Eagle Scouts lead each pack.”

“Excellent . . . Oh, here it is.” Mr. Flame Tattoos finds the baseball. It’s completely ordinary save a tiny fuse sticking out of a hole that’s been drilled into it. “Do they still do them dirt fights at camp?”

“I don’t know,” D.H. says. “It’s my first year.”

“I see. Well, we used to pack rocks in the dirt clods. One time, I hit another scout so hard that it sent him to the hospital.”

“Really?”

“Really. He was lost or something. He must have been. I hurled one straight at his head and it caught him square in the temple. He went down, and we went running for a Scoutmaster.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was fine. Just shook up pretty well. But me? I got kicked out of scouts. I was a Senior Eagle Scout and everything. I was a damn good throw, though . . . Take this.” Mr. Flame Tattoos hands D.H. the baseball. “You thrown one of these, right?”

“A baseball?”

“Yeah. You throw well?”

“Don’t know.”

“Let’s find out.”

The Boyfriend calls out D.H.’s name, waves to him, trying to get his attention—D.H. can see him wave from the corner of his eye—but he won’t look away from Mr. Flame Tattoos.

“What’s that?” The Boyfriend says, but no one hears him.

“Right, so when I light the fuse, you throw it as hard as you can into the air. Oh, also, light the fuse at the very end this time.” He points to where D.H. should light it. “It’s a big one. Mini-dynamite. So make sure to throw it well.”

“Hold still.” The man holds the baseball in place, and D.H. grapples with the lighter again. He flicks the wheel and it lights up. Before the Boyfriend can interject, the fuse has caught and it spews sparks.

“Wait just a second. Gotta wait until the fuse is—”

The flame crawls down the fuse.

“Now! Go!”

D.H. winds back his arm and throws it as high as he can. It twirls for a little while, hanging up above them. Then the fire strikes the dynamite. The baseball disappears with the explosion. It lasts a split-second and the sound knocks D.H. in the chest. Someone screams. He hears the echo repeat, bristling across the edges of the park. It holds everyone’s attention until an M80 erupts somewhere else.

“Yeah! Hell of an arm you got.” The man nods at D.H. “You should play some baseball with that arm.”

D.H. smiles for the first time.

“Okay then.” The Boyfriend puts a protective arm around D.H.. “I think we’ve worn out our welcome.”

“Oh, not at all.”

“Thanks for the cigarette, gentlemen.”

“Hold on—”

But they turn from the crowd and the Boyfriend urges them across the field. D.H. looks back and sees Mr. Flame Tattoos wink. In front, he can see his mom waiting, arms-crossed.

“You packed and everything?” the Boyfriend asks.

“Yeah.”

“Good then . . . Don’t listen to anything that guy said, all right?”

“Okay.”

“And, don’t tell your mother what just happened. Okay?”

“Yeah fine.”

“Really though.” The Boyfriend stops. “No fireworks. No cigarettes. Nothing. Got it?”

D.H. nods again. “I want to go to camp. It won’t be that bad,” D.H. says.

“Okay . . . good.” The Boyfriend fishes a bottle of mouthwash from his pocket and rinses his mouth. They walk toward D.H.’s mother.

D.H. scans the field: Several people are lighting Artillery Shells in a long line. Fountains shoot piles of colored sparks and Roman Candles arc across the starry night. As it’s gotten darker, the light from the explosions have become more stark, more dramatic. He notices Queeg, a kid from his scout troop. He’s flanked by his parents, who both have piles of fireworks in their arms. The mother leans over and hands a bottle rocket to Queeg. He snatches a lighter from his

pocket and lights the fuse. His mother yells after him, but he runs away, holding the bottle rocket above his head. She turns to her husband, looking for support, but he too is failing to get Queeg's attention. Queeg doesn't look back. He keeps running—eyes squeezed shut—until the bottle rocket zips out of his hand: It sails through the air and blows apart into a thousand streaks of fire.



Family Life



Animal Science



Communication

Chapter Two

Fifth of July, Morning: 1910 Wickshire Lane

D.H. knows the Boyfriend has arrived because there's this terrific crash of pots, pans, and silverware in the kitchen. He hears the scrape of forks and knives across the floor, and the Boyfriend's raspy voice, cursing inanimate objects. D.H. pulls the blanket off his head and falls out of bed. He stumbles to the door and wipes the sleep from his eyes. When he comes down the hallway and approaches the kitchen, the Boyfriend is scrambling to put everything back on the shelves. He notices D.H. and he's balancing an armful of saute pans and cookie sheets.

"Little man!" He clatters it all on the countertop and saunters over. He clamps D.H.'s shoulder. "Good to see you . . . again."

"Hey." D.H. walks to the pantry door and grabs a pop tart from the box. He fidgets with the aluminum wrapping until it gives and he pulls out the pastry. He pops it into his mouth and savors it.

"Right on. So, your mom wants me to take you to her work so she can see you off before scouts."

D.H. mumbles something in agreement.

"Right. So, I think that means we need to scoot just about . . ." He pushes back his sleeve and checks his watch. "Now." He's surprisingly punctual, which must be because D.H.'s mother has hounded him over the phone for the past few hours ago.

He eyes all the pots and pans and how they're going to fit into the pantry again. "Your mom will figure this out." He clears his throat. "We really gotta go D.H."

D.H. tosses the wrapper in the trash, and grabs the things from his room. He's gotten just about everything into his backpack and duffel bag. He makes sure there's a little compartment in his backpack for his inhaler. He takes several puffs before putting it away. He holds his breath for as long as he can to let it sink into his lungs. He changes into his uniform: He buttons up his tan Boy Scout over-shirt that's covered with multicolored badges and ribbons. There're symbols stitched into the badges: a man rowing in a canoe, a snake with a black diamond pattern across its back, and a compass and needle pointing northeast. He pulls up his blue shorts and pulls the belt through the buckle. It's a faded gold and the front of it bears the head of a wolf. He folds up a green sash from his closet and stuffs it into the duffel bag. At the end of his pack hangs a portable pillow and a sleeping bag.

In his room, he gets distracted by a few of the lego creations on his desk. He fixes a couple bricks that have popped off the front gate of the drawbridge. Little toy soldiers are lined across the ramparts. They hold bows, arrows, spears, and metal swords. The incoming horde pushes a battering ram towards the gate. They don red and black helmets with horns sticking out either side. Their faces are gnarled and scared. The hero is a fully-equipped knight, armor strapped to his chest and arms. He holds a sword in the air to rally the troops.

The Boyfriend mashes on the horn of his car. D.H. gathers up his things and runs to the garage.

The Boyfriend waits outside his car. "C'mon little man. I'm gonna be in some serious shit—I mean, big trouble with your mom."

D.H. throws his stuff in the open trunk. The Boyfriend slams it shut and the car groans and sputters a few times until it jerks alive. It's a rusty Buick LeSabre from the 80s. The Boyfriend has to open the passenger door from the inside because the handle broke off over a year ago.

D.H. steps inside—there are loose CDs (Nirvana and Pearl Jam, mostly) and a few bags from McDonald's which may or may not still have moldy food inside. The car squeals when it backs out of the driveway. The noise persists until they gain speed along the Austin suburban streets, and it quiets down.

“Hey, I got a good one,” the Boyfriend says.

“What?”

“A joke. It's kind of a joke . . . You'll like it.”

D.H. reaches for his backpack and feels for his inhaler to make sure it's still there. He adjusts the seat belt so it isn't strangling him so much. He clears his throat. “Oh yeah?”

“Imagine, if you will, that the earth had donkeys and they didn't have tails . . . wait, that isn't it. Hold on . . .” The Boyfriend only has one hand on the steering wheel and half his attention on the road. He eyes D.H. “Wait, I'll remember it. Hold on.” He feels for a cigarette, and as they pass through an intersection, he lights it. He blows the smoke out the window. “What was I saying? The donkeys. Right. Okay. I got it. So, imagine we had always called the tail of a donkey a leg. We still called the legs, legs, of course . . .” He lets go of the wheel to do air quotes with his fingers. “But we also called the tail a leg too. Get it? Now, the question is, how many legs does the donkey have?”

“This is a stupid question.”

“Aw, little man. You don’t mean that. C’mon. Whaduya think? If you had to say. How many legs does the donkey have now that we call the tail a leg too?”

“I don’t know. Five, I guess.”

“Nope! Donkey only have four legs. It doesn’t matter what you call the tail. That doesn’t change how many legs it has!” The Boyfriend starts cackling, hitting the dashboard with the palm of his hand. “Isn’t that a good one?”

He can’t stop laughing and it’s become difficult for him to breathe.

D.H. slumps in his seat, and shakes his head.

The Boyfriend finally gets hold of himself. “All right, whatever little man. How about some music then?” He cranks the knob all the way to the right and for the remainder of the drive, they listen to grunge on full volume.

The Boyfriend sings along and drums the air when he doesn’t have to touch the steering wheel. D.H. feels a throb in his temple.

When the Boyfriend finishes his cigarette, he rolls down all the windows to clear out the smoke. He pulls a small bottle of mouthwash and gargles it. He spits the stuff out the window.

They pull in front of the Bank of America building on Congress and Pecan, smack dab in the middle of downtown Austin. There’s D.H.’s mother in a suit jacket and leather purse. She’s smoking a cigarette, and talking to a friend of hers. D.H. recognizes the lady. She’s the one who’s always doused in suffocating perfume. She’s spent a lot of time at D.H.’s house and usually doesn’t leave until three in the morning. Her voice operates at a decibel much higher than the average human, so it’s hard to mistake her voice from any other. D.H. remembers the time when

she first met him. “My name is Patricia! I absolutely love your name, D.H. What does it stand for?” D.H. recognizes it once he and the Boyfriend pull up to the curb. They wait for them to notice the car.

“Oh my god, J. You are hysterical! You know what I love about you, is that you don’t take shit from anyone. Oh my god, J. The look at that poor girl’s face today. It took everything in me not to start howling in laughter.”

They are both laughing and touching each other’s shoulder.

The Boyfriend honks the horn. It takes D.H.’s mother totally off guard. She spots them idling on the street corner. She flicks her cigarette and swipes her hand through the air to erase the smoke. She says goodbye to the old lady with the perfume and runs to the car.

“Back seat, now,” the Boyfriend orders.

D.H. climbs into the back. His mother bounds in after him.

“Robbie! Thank you so much. Today has been hell.”

“No problem, babe.”

They make little chipmunk faces and rub their noses together. They maintain this display for almost a minute before she remembers D.H. in the back seat. She turns to him. “And how about you, D.H.? Hows your day been? Ready for scouts?”

“Yeah I guess so. I’ve got all my stuff.”

“Sleeping bag?”

“Yes.”

“Travel tissue?”

“Yes.”

“An extra pair of socks?”

“Yes.”

“But remember how you forgot one time. Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You don’t have to take that tone! I’m just doing the mom thing. I’m your mother, you know! Have you forgot already?”

D.H stares ahead and doesn’t really react. She lays her hand on the Boyfriend’s knee.

“All right sweetheart, let’s go.”

* * *

Being a single child, D.H. has always gotten more than the average share of attention from his mother. She spends the majority of her time worrying that she works too much even though she works barely enough to support them. But the wellbeing of her child is a top priority—it had taken almost a year before she could trust the Boyfriend enough to drive him around like this, and watch D.H. on his own. Her preoccupation was only exasperated by the fact that in the past year, D.H. has begun to ignite the gas burners on their stove, and place his hand over the warmth of the flame. Once, when D.H.’s mother had walked into the kitchen (after stepping outside for a cigarette), she found her son putting his hand directly onto the heat of the flame. Naturally, she panicked and took him straight to the ER. They found that he’d been putting his hand onto the heat on a regular basis. There was a thick layer of blisters crusted across his hands. The doctors suspected abuse, so D.H.’s mother had to give a lengthy and desperate explanation but really, she couldn’t think of any plausible reason except that he hadn’t really made the connection between the flame and the heat. That must have been it. Perhaps it was out of sheer

curiosity that he'd put his hand over the flame like that. They sent him home with medication and ointment, with a strict warning to his mother. D.H.'s mom got into the habit of pointing out every item in the house and scolding him, making damn sure that he'd know what was dangerous.

* * *

In the back seat of the car, while the Boyfriend and his mom chat, D.H. looks at his hand and traces the scars still visible across his skin. The sun outside radiates the humidity and it's getting hot as hell. He asks if they can turn on the A/C. Either they ignore him or they just can't hear him above their chatter. D.H. pulls out his inhaler from his backpack and compresses the canister. He breathes in the mist and feels it fill his lungs. He holds his breath for as long as he can until he breathes out again. It tastes sour.

They pull into the parking lot of the church where the scouts are all loading equipment into the trailer. About half of the troop is there—at least two scouts attending to each piece of luggage with Scoutmaster Barrett ordering them around. The scoutmaster's six Senior Eagle Scouts (each of whom leads their own pack) have spent the entire day unloading poles, tarps, and tent stakes to erect home base and staff quarters when they arrive at the camp. A few scouts from Grizzly Pack are folding a Troop 459 flag. It's the one that's been stitched together by Senior Eagle Scout Riess during his Eagle-initiation retreat. He'd fought for its honor against several coyotes with just his Boy Scout issue army knife. When a coyote made off with the flag between its teeth, Riess chased it across several miles of open flatlands. He cornered a group of them in a dried-up riverbed and descended upon them, knife in hand. He wrestled them in the dust of the

evening sun. He emerged from the bloodied pack of coyotes with a ripped up flag—so the story goes. After victory, he'd plucked a cactus barb, tied it to a thread of yarn, and sewed the flag together again. The story's apocryphal, of course, and it's gained more fanciful detail as it's traveled from one mouth to another. D.H. doesn't think that anyone really believes it but after his initiation, Senior Eagle Scout Riess did return with the newly stitched flag. Plus, he's never denied the story outright, so it lives on.

They park in the dirt on the south side of the lot, away from everyone else.

D.H. looks out on the rest of the troop and back to his mother. "Do I have to go?"

"You've changed your mind?"

"Dunno."

"What is it?"

"Never mind. Forget it."

"Okay, well I think they're waiting; we're late." The Boyfriend nods in agreement.

"Okay," D.H. says.

D.H. gets out of the car, and gets his things from the trunk. They're heavy and awkward. He sets them on the ground before readjusting his grip and grabbing them all at once. D.H.'s mother grabs him from behind and holds him close to her chest. She kisses the top of his head.

"Love you sweetie. Have a wonderful time."

D.H. turns around and hugs his mother for a while. When he senses that she's about to cry, he pulls away and grabs his things again. She turns from him and jumps into the LeSabre. The Boyfriend revs the engine. He pops into second gear and the tires whirl dirt into the air. D.H.

hears his mom squeal as they speed off, across the parking lot, onto the street, and then finally, out of sight.

D.H. doesn't have much time before his pack leader hails him from across the parking lot, by the trailer. He pulls his stuff together and walks in that direction. Most of the troop are chatting about their plans when they arrive on the campgrounds. D.H. notices Queeg, Dragon Pack's First Assistant. There are a few other scouts around him, trying to get a glimpse at what Queeg has in his hand. D.H. inches into the group without being noticed too much. Queeg opens a knife that he has strapped to his belt. He pulls it open and twists it around for everyone to see. It glints in the sunlight and the sun reflects in D.H.'s eyes.

Scoutmaster Barrett sees the crowd and is quick to break it up. He tells Queeg to put the blade away. "I don't want to see that thing again or else it's getting confiscated." He orders a few of the loitering scouts to run inside and grab the last of the cooking supplies. He gets D.H. to start loading the equipment into the trailer, and when he's done with that, to help Quartermaster Stub make sure that everything is accounted for.

D.H. picks up his backpack and duffel bag and moves it to the mouth of the trailer. He looks over and sees Queeg flashing his blade to a few other curious scouts, making sure to hide it when Scoutmaster Barrett is looking.

* * *

His first camping experience consisted of an exclusive trip with the Dragon Pack. Scoutmaster Barrett had found this to be the best way for all the scouts to get to know one another, and he'd left Scoutmaster Tuning to supervise them. (Scoutmaster Tuning is the eldest member of the troop and has gained a reputation for falling asleep frequently and in almost every

place imaginable.) Queeg had gotten the rest of the pack to set up a fire pit a few hundred feet from their campground. They took D.H. to their newly lit stage, and recited creeds which D.H. still doesn't remember. Halfway through, Queeg took a stick from a nearby tree and put it in the flames. He blew on it until it glowed a cherry ember. He grabbed D.H.'s hand and pushed the ember into his middle knuckle. D.H. yelled, but Queeg wrapped his hand over D.H.'s mouth. Queeg muttered, "The breath of the dragon imprints into your skin." It burned a scar into his skin that looked like an apple. After that, they inspected him, physically. They grabbed at his arms, his legs, and his belly. They noted any excess fat and commented when they found something they disliked. They all shook their heads and conferred amongst themselves. Queeg stood a few feet in front of him. "Drop your pants," he ordered. D.H. looked at the rest of the pack, but their faces gave nothing away. "Look," Queeg said. Queeg undid his belt and pulled his pants down to mid-thigh. D.H. meant to look away, but for a brief moment, he saw it. He'd never seen another penis before. Illuminated by the flickering campfire, he noticed that Queeg's, unlike his own, had far more girth; it sprouted like a mushroom from a gnarled mesh of thick hair and the skin was pulled all the way back. Queeg waited, staring at D.H. Finally, he undid his own buckle. D.H. dropped his pants to his knees, squeezing his eyes shut. He felt the liberating breeze of the cold air rush in between his legs. He felt something stirring inside of him, something like excitement. The pack strained to get a good look. They murmured to one another and stared at it for a whole minute.

* * *

The memory lingers as D.H. watches Queeg in front of the church.

D.H. doesn't say much as it is, but especially now, listening to Quartermaster Stub read from a long list of alphabetized supplies. D.H. mutters, "Yup," and "Got it," to make sure that Stub hears him. He sees a few of his fellow Dragon Pack members show up as well. They all go straight for Queeg, asking whether he has a real, actual knife or whether everyone else is lying. Queeg pulls it slightly from his pocket so they can see its long blade. They express their admiration and excitement. Queeg vows to challenge Senior Eagle Scout Riess to a hunting competition. The younger scouts promise that Queeg can best any of Riess' attempts in the wild. D.H. notices how fast this gets around, and, caught up listening to everyone, he forgets to check off supplies from the list. He notices that quartermaster Stub is already at the w's with "1 wicker basket," so D.H. checks everything off the list from where he lost track: paraffin wax, pencils, pens, etc.

It takes another half an hour to load up the trailer with all of their supplies and by that time, the majority of Troop 459 has arrived. The parents have said their goodbyes; the scouts have found their packs; and Scoutmaster Barrett readies his pre-departure prayer. He calls for attention and each of the pack leaders scramble to get their scouts in line. D.H. notices their pack leader, Senior Eagle Scout Riess, arguing with Queeg getting him to stop flashing his knife around. Soon enough, they are all standing in straight lines, each one of them seven scouts deep. Scoutmaster Barrett calls for attention and they all hold two fingers into the air. At once the troop intones, "On my honor, I will do my best. To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight."

Scoutmaster Barrett grins. “Scouts. Thank you for being here. I just want to say a prayer before we head off, and make sure God blesses our travels. After the prayer, everyone follow your Pack Leader; each one will be driving a van to take us to Garner Park.”

D.H. always imagines doing something terribly embarrassing during one of these moments. There is something about the silence imposed by a solemn prayer—when it is absolutely dire that everyone stand still and be silent—that he feels an overwhelming need to break wind, something mighty and profound, echoing across the parking lot, horrifying the Scoutmasters.

“Dear Heavenly Father, please guide us on our trip and keep our scouts safe. We thank You on this tremendous July afternoon for the clear skies and the perfect temperature. We ask for You to light our path to a greater good, to show the way closer to You and Your glory. Our scouts will become better sons, better brothers, better citizens, and of course, better worshippers of Your glory. We thank You for everything God, and in Your name we pray. Amen.”

The troop grumbles amen. They break apart and follow their pack leaders to the vans. Scoutmaster Barrett hooks his SUV to the trailer and leads the expedition. The vans join him, forming a bright line of vehicles. The convoy pulls onto the road, turns onto the highway, and plows through the heat of the Texas sun.



Orienteering



Scouting Heritage



Search and Rescue

Chapter Three

Fifth of July, Afternoon: Garner State Park

D.H. stumbles through the tress. He checks his compass but when he levels it on his palm, the needle spins in circles. It's broken, obviously, and Queeg must have known that when he gave it to him. As per the Orienteering Merit Badge requirements, D.H. has to navigate half a mile of the Rio Frio, then transcribe all significant topographical features onto his map, and create a blueprint of an area that's already been charted. He can hear the rush of water nearby, which provides the slightest amount of orientation. The leaves of the Cyprus trees dice up the sunlight.

D.H. unshoulders his pack, and lays it against the trunk of a tree. He collapses on the ground and stares at the sky above. With his head resting on the dirt and the grass, he can feel the ants tickle the back of his neck. He tilts his water bottle towards his mouth. Most of it spills onto his shirt and chin—more than what makes it into his mouth. Sure, he's lost, but he's fairly content to be alone amidst the trees. He retrieves his inhaler from his backpack and puts it to his mouth. The wind sweeps through and masks the sound of yelling. The leaves crinkle in his ears and drown out the noise.

The noise cuts through. Someone's hollering away and tearing through the forest. D.H. pushes himself up and brushes the leaves and dirt from his fleece. Only a few yards away, D.H. sees the red and black scarf of Troop 459 flashing between the trees. The figure rips a few

branches when he cuts through the canopy; he lands right in front of D.H. The kid's shirt has been torn and he has black charcoal smeared across his cheeks.

"D.H." He's out of breath and doubled over. He comes to and stands up, a giant for his age. "D.H. up, up now!" It's Second Scout Assistant Reginald.

* * *

Like most of the scouts in Troop 459, Reginald was with the pack long before D.H. joined, and he was one of the first scouts that D.H. met. Stricken with a premature growth spurt, Reginald was the tallest of all the scouts by a full head. He towered over every other scout in the troop, especially the scouts of Dragon Pack. When D.H. first entered the room, he caught sight of Reginald first, with the red and black neckerchief tied around his collar, and the golden dragon scarf ring which held it together like a tie. D.H. approached him and not knowing what else to do, poked him. Reginald swung around and almost punched D.H. in the face. His hands stopped short of his face, and upon realizing he was a recruit, he righted himself and lowered his arms.

"Oh. Sorry about that. Orientation for new scouts is in the other room."

He pointed in that direction.

"You're gonna be in our pack?"

D.H. nodded. "I think so."

"Right on." He socked him on the shoulder, knocking D.H. of his feet. "You'll be all right."

It gave him a dead arm for most of the day, and he spent the night massaging it. A bruise set in and it turned his upper arm purple. D.H. agonized over the arm when he held up for the oath.

Scoutmaster Barrett gathered all the recruits in a separate room and spoke tenderly about Lord Baden-Powell, the paragon of exemplary scouting. A standard meeting consisted of an opening prayer, unfurling the American Flag, reciting the Scout Oath, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and reciting the Texas Pledge of Allegiance. After that, the bugle boy tooted his rendition of the Star Spangled Banner which was so awful, and so closely resembled the braying of a donkey, that it took all the effort in the world for the rest of the scouts not to burst out laughing—but a number of them always cracked and failed to disguise their laughter as coughing.

Scoutmaster Barrett taught the recruits the Scout Oath, and related the meaning of each direction to their daily lives: They fulfilled their duty to God during prayer, and fulfilled their duty to country during the Pledge of Allegiance. They'd help fellow students in class or help an un-athletic player during football scrimmage; this kept them physically strong and mentally awake. The new scouts clambered to explain how they exemplified every characteristic. Christopher, a Grizzly Pack recruit, could do fifteen pushups without going on his knees like the girls and he could recall every word the teacher said in class. Wolf Pack recruit Marshall emphasized that he had beaten the record time at school for multiplication tables and quarter-mile sprints. They marched through each line with ease, but puzzled over the last requirement: keeping "morally straight."

Christopher ventured a guess: it meant to be nice to your parents.

"No, not quite Christopher, but good guess!"

Another asked whether it meant being nice to girls even though they smell sometimes.

Scoutmaster Barrett chuckled, but shook his head.

D.H. raised his hand. He was slow to start, but Scoutmaster Barrett encouraged him to speak his mind.

“I think,” D.H. began. “I think it has to do with being good and like, not moving away from the straight path.”

“Another great guess, Scouts! But that isn’t quite it.”

D.H. felt hot with shame and didn’t say anything more. Scoutmaster Barrett paced back and forth along the line of new scouts. He played with his thin, grey mustache, twirling one side and flattening it. Realizing that the scouts were out of guesses, he spoke again.

“No, Scouts. Morally straight means you’re not gay! You don’t like other boys!”

Of course, D.H. thought. He vowed not to raise his hand again unless he knew the right answer, absolutely.

“I kissed a girl on the cheek last year!” Christopher blurted out.

Scoutmaster Barrett ruffled his hair. “I bet you did, Christopher. Good for you . . . Okay Scouts, let’s go into the other room and watch the rest of the meeting. You will all stay with me, but pay close attention. Next week I expect all of you to know exactly what to do and when.”

When they stepped outside, the bugle boy had finished and the color guard unfurled the flags. D.H. noticed Reginald again. Even from where he stood, he could see a shade of tiny hairs bursting from his chin. D.H. rubbed his own chin and felt flabby, smooth flesh. Dwarfed by Reginald’s frame was a scout named Pip. Almost D.H.’s height, he was an adolescent boy caught in a perpetual state of challenging everyone to a fight. He advocated what’s known as “bodies,” a duel in which two contenders slam their fists into each other’s abdomens until the losing fighter retreats and fall to their knees. No one took him up on the offer, since, as he claimed, the scouts

knew the embarrassment that would come with losing a fight. He promised D.H. a thrashing after the meeting. D.H. could only imagine Pip throwing his fists at someone like Reginald and getting flattened like a bug.

* * *

Although he seems incapable of growing a full beard like the Boyfriend, Reginald has a dark shadow running along his chin into his sideburns. And despite the liberal coating of charcoal across his face, D.H. can still see and admire the facial hair across Reginald's face.

He runs to D.H. and grabs him by the arm. "D.H. now! We've got to go."

D.H. barely has enough time to grab his backpack and swing it around his shoulders before Reginald shoves him through the trees—away from the river he's supposed to be tracking. A few tree limbs smack D.H. in the face. He struggles to keep his eyes open and see where he's going. The threat of a leaf or a twig keeps them closed. When they stumble on a clearing, both in a dead sprint, D.H. glimpses what looks like a girl standing alone across the field, but she disappears when they run through the clearing and into the trees again. D.H. can feel the threat of an asthma attack from the stress on his lungs. He reaches around to try to grab his pack, but when he turns around, Reginald is a few inches from his face.

"D.H. what the hell did I say! Go go go!"

D.H. can't imagine what he's pushing him towards, but it's not like he has much of a choice here. He can only hope and pray that soon enough Scoutmaster Barrett will recruit a new set of scouts, and D.H. will escape this yearlong hazing.

When they round the corner, D.H. grabs a low hanging branch, for balance. He slows down and Reginald crashes into him. They both go tumbling down an incline.

“Idiot!” Reginald jumps to his feet again, and he sees that the two of them have rolled through a puddle of mud. Their uniforms are filthy. D.H. is fighting for breath. He leans forward and sucks the air for oxygen. His lungs wheeze and crackle. He flips his backpack around and scrambles for his inhaler. He presses it several times and takes as much of it into his lungs as he can. Reginald runs over and kicks him in the side.

“D.H., what the hell is that?”

D.H. shakes his head and doesn’t talk because he’s trying to keep all the medicine in his lungs. It expands the alveoli to allow for as much oxygen as possible into his bloodstream. He remembers the whole explanation from the doctor.

“D.H., let me see that.”

He exhales and bends over. Once he’s collected himself, he looks up Reginald.

“Nothing. It’s nothing. Where are we supposed to go?”

“Shit. You’re not slipping out of this one.”

Both of them are on their feet tearing through the woods again.

When they arrive, D.H. notices Pip keeled over on the ground, moaning.

“My sides,” he yells. He’s pleading for help. D.H. forgets about Reginald and his inhaler. He walks straight to Pip.

“What’s going on?”

Pip moans loader, almost screaming, begging someone for help and make the pain stop. D.H. gets as close as he can, trying to figure out what the hell has happened. He reaches for Pip. He’s about to ask him what the matter is; he wants to help. But D.H.’s concern vanishes once Pip looks up. He has this absurd grin plastered across his face. From behind him, he pulls a stick off

the ground and winds back his arm. He's getting ready to fling it at D.H.'s face. D.H. can't quite keep up with what's going on. And when the confusion subsides, it's too late: From the end of the stick, Pip has successfully launched, as if from a trebuchet, a brown and yellow turd, a solid mass of Pip's own, home-brewed formula; and when it scrapes across D.H.'s forearm, it streaks across his skin, and small wads of it get tangled in the hair on his arm.

D.H. screams. Reginald and Pip high-five each other. They howl and D.H. sprints straight back to the Rio Frio. He's in a semi-panic and he can smell it wafting off his arm; he wants to keep it away, but it's no good because all the trees, the branches, and the leaves keep his arm tucked to his side. He reaches the water and dunks the whole right half of his body into the river. He doesn't dare touch his arm, but it won't really wash away like that. He wipes his arm across the grass, but with all the shit tangled in the hairs of his arm, it isn't going anywhere soon. He spends the next ten minutes dunking his arm in the water until he's soaked himself through and through. Pip and Reginald have followed and sat down for the show. A few others from Dragon Pack stumble upon the performance as well; they join Pip and Reginald, passing a bag of trail mix back and forth, watching D.H.'s attempt to get the shit off his arm.

When D.H. stops, he sits on the edge of the water, fighting back tears. By then, Queeg, who had been scouting out their portion of the park, finds D.H. He sits next to him. He messages D.H.'s shoulder for a little while. D.H. doesn't so much as look at him. Queeg whips out his knife.

"Look." He shows D.H. the length of the blade and penetrates the ground. He swings his pack around and pulls out an arrowhead fashioned from a rock. "Isn't that something? Best damn blade that I have right there. Next I'll get a stick and tie the arrowhead to it."

There's a long bout of silence. Both of them stare ahead at the water. A few tears snake down D.H.'s face and slip off his nose. Queeg notices.

"Listen. Let's make it up to you okay?"

"What?"

"Take your time here. Finish your orienteering thing. But meet at the pit tonight. It'll be fun."

D.H. wipes the tears from his eyes real quick and he looks over at Queeg. He's grinning and twirling the arrowhead in his fingers.

"Good thing. It's a plan." Queeg slaps him on the shoulder. He's on his feet and walks back to the rest of the pack. D.H. stares at the Rio Frio for another hour stewing. As a gesture of goodwill, Queeg tells everyone to leave him alone for the night.

* * *

The last time that D.H. saw his father, the old man was cooking a burger in their backyard, and the smell of grilling meat wafted into D.H.'s bedroom. It was early in April and probably the first time that they'd ever be able to grill. D.H. wandered outside and his father was muttering to himself. D.H. held his hand over the hot charcoal briquettes of their portable black grill to feel the heat. He almost put his hand directly on the grilling rack, but D.H.'s father marched over and pushed him out of the way. His father poked the meat with his spatula. It hissed every time he did.

Apropos of nothing, his father spoke, "D.H. I've got a few things to tell you. Your mom and I don't see eye to eye on everything. You've heard about it from her, I'm sure. Well, the thing is that sometimes when you're young, you don't think too well, and this will happen. I love you

bud, but it's like this: one day I woke up with a pregnant girlfriend who'd lost her mind. I didn't even know how to pay the bills. My father never paid the bills, so how the hell was I supposed to know? You've just gotta be careful. That's all, bud. Be careful." He lifted his handle of Jack Daniels—drank most of it. He poured the last of the alcohol on the frying burger.

When he finished, he slapped it between two loaves of bread and squirted some ketchup in it. "Wanna bite?"

D.H. slid next to his father and snatched the burger. He took a big bite of it.

"You little shit! Not so much."

His father stole it back and ate the rest of it in a few short bites.

"Damn thing. Takes longer to fry it than to eat."

When D.H.'s mother came home, she found the two of them like that, sitting together, shoulder to shoulder. She didn't say anything, but just watched them from the sliding door.

D.H. excused himself for the bathroom. He remembers every detail: the smell of their hand soap, the feel of old towels, and the pale halogen lighting of their bathroom.

When he came back, his father was gone. When he looked inside, there was no one there either. He went to the hallway and yelled "Dad?" But all he could hear was the echo of his voice, hollow and empty.



Canoeing



Wilderness Survival



Indian Lore

Chapter Four

Fifth of July, Night: The Fire Pit

D.H. finds the Dragon Pack gathered around the fire, throwing little bits of kindling and twigs into it, and when they land, the fire flares up and twists around; the dance of the flame is sort of hypnotic. D.H. plants himself a few feet from it, and devotes himself to gazing at the red and orange flicker. Queeg spots him and scurries to his side.

“D.H., I’m glad you’re here. We’ve been waiting for ya.”

Everyone’s accounted for: Reginald and Pip squat on the opposite side of the fire and have set up a little Indian teepee made of sticks which they are trying their best to balance. The wind has picked up and the temperature has dropped. They draw closer to the fire. Elias and Flack sit on either side of Senior Eagle Scout Riess while he tells one of his stories.

“A few years back, I almost died”

“Really?”

“For the retreat. You know, you go by yourself.”

“You have to go by yourself?”

“Right. They give you a few things like a pocket knife, lighter, sleeping bag, and a scout guidebook. It’s very minimal. And Scoutmaster Barrett makes you do way more than you’d ever expect for the badge. I’ve actually looked it up and in Eagle requirements, there’s nothing about being alone and nothing about having no supplies at all. Not that I minded or anything. But him and Tuning . . . Tuning’s old but he’s seen some shit.”

“What do you mean?” Elias and Flack haven’t taken their eyes off of Riess. He’s produced a pipe from his pocket, and lit the bowl. Tobacco smoke swirls with the smoke of the fire.

“Well, Tuning served in the Second World War. He has this story that’ll he probably tell you if you get stuck with him. Battle of the Hill, or something like that. He lead a charge and threw a grenade into a machine gun nest. Killed a bunch of Nazis. He’s something of a hero, and doesn’t even look it. The point is that him and Barrett—he served too—are big believers in training. It’s good for you, I suppose.”

There’s a bit of silence as Riess goes to work on his pipe again. D.H. raises his palm to the fire and feels the warmth prick up and down his palm.

“Well?”

“Right then.” Riess sets his pipe aside. “So, the two of them throw me into the back of their Ranger, and we went off-roading for a while. All that I knew was that we started on the outside of Austin. I was blindfolded in the back of their ranger, while they talked about responsibility and leadership, and they made me recite these mantras about it. I definitely was not made pack leader on a whim or anything.”

Queeg leans in, wondering if the same fate will be in store for him. He sits next to D.H. and goes real wide-eyed, in a way that D.H. has never seen before.

“They just told me that as a pack leader I had to make tough decisions, and decisions on behalf of others that I might regret. I didn’t remember a whole lot of it to be honest. But it’s weird, you know. You’re blindfolded and riding in the back of a car for over two hours, and you really start to doubt what they’re doing, or if it’s all some big joke, like they’re just insane and

what you're doing is just as insane. Anyway, when we finally got there, they told me to take the blindfold off, and I found myself on a big slope that overlooked a bunch of other hills. There were trees in every direction—more than I'd ever seen before. I gathered up all my stuff and set it on the highest part of the hill because there weren't any rocks and it was pretty flat. I figured the scoutmasters would stick around to help me. But once I had my back turned, they jumped into the Ranger and revved the engine. Barrett unrolled the window and shouted, 'We'll be back in two days.' He held out two fingers, and then they were gone. Driving back down the hill towards wherever they'd come from."

"What'd you do?"

"Set up camp and ate the last of the trail mix I'd brought with me."

"Were you scared?"

"It was more boring than anything else, actually. I figured out a neat trick. I remembered at the bottom of my sleeping bag there was a spare container of lighter fluid. The first night, there were coyotes. They're super loud, and they'll let you know they're coming from a ways off. Quite a scare when you're in the middle of sleeping. But I made a coupla Boom Sticks. They're really easy to make. You just take some kindling and pack it together as hard as you can. Then you chew up a bunch of gum and wrap it around all the kindling—make it into a bunch. The more compact it is, the more dramatic the boom. Then I covered the thing in lighter fluid. I stuck it into the side of the hill, a few feet from my sleeping bag. I could hear those fuckers getting closer. I pulled out my lighter and lit it. If you do it right, it gets bright as hell and makes a hell of a lot of noise with all its hissing and popping. They didn't bother me none after that."

And that was about all that happened. After getting the coyotes away, I sat around mostly. They didn't bother me none. I had a lot of time to think."

"What'd you eat?"

"You've never been rabbit hunting before?"

"What about the flag, and you sewed it back together?"

"Another story, another time."

Senior Eagle Scout Riess nods to himself and smiles. He turns over and clears his throat. His spit is thick and gooey. Elias and Flack wait for his next story.

Riess fiddles with the wooden pipe again. It's empty so he pulls out a bag of tobacco. He stuffs it into the bowl. He packs it with his lighter and repeats this process a few times. He's got nearly a quarter of the bag in there, then lights it. Miniature clouds of smoke leak out of the side of his mouth. An ember burns deep inside the tobacco. When Riess inhales, it illuminates his face and exaggerates his features.

"The Canoeing Merit Badge actually isn't difficult," he's tells them. "So don't worry about that one too much. But it was just that we went with old Tuning, and you know, he doesn't know what the hell is going on sometimes. Really, all you've got to do is row across the river, tie a few knots. That shit. But he takes us all the way down the river. He screams at us like we're in his company and we're back in Germany or something. Kooky bastard. Right, but he doesn't notice all the rocks and where the river becomes rapids. It's a disaster. You know, by the time we see it, it's too late and all the little scouts are screaming. They're thrown overboard because none of them have ever been in a canoe, let alone been in one going through the rapids. There's like six of us and three canoes. The first two go quick. The little scouts try to row themselves to the

shore but it only turned their canoe sideways; the rapids took care of the rest. Then the other one dipped forward and got stuck on a rock. I dove out before we hit the rocks.”

Riess takes a long drag from his pipe and blows the smoke into the air. He takes another long puff and lets the smoke slowly seep from his open mouth. Some of it curls into his nose.

“So?”

“Yeah, so. It was a shit show. I had to dive after the scouts downstream and pull them out. Tuning was about to crap his pants but I told him I wouldn’t tell anyone about it. And that was that. We got them dried out, slapped merit badges on their virgin sashes, and no one was the wiser.”

Queeg puts his arrowhead into his pocket and interjects. “Okay everyone, now that the man of the hour is here.” He motions to D.H. “We can continue as usual.” Pip returns to the fire and throws a log into it. Sparks and embers fly into the air.

“It’s our last challenge for D.H . . . It’s a special time for him . . . The clip. It will look something like this.” He holds what looks like a bunch of bullets mashed together. The only time D.H. ever sees bullets and guns are when the scoutmasters take them out to the range. The first time was particularly harsh when it left a melon-sized bruise on his shoulder. It hurt D.H. to even lift his arm that day.

Queeg slaps the clip in his hands. It’s cold and heavy.

“It’s somewhere out there.” He motions in one big sweep to the forest around them. “And every one of us have found it, returned it to camp, and buried it again.”

D.H. considers this. There are at least a hundred acres to cover and it could be hidden or buried anywhere across the camp. The probability of it being in any one place is staggering.

“Scoutmaster Barrett, the real Scoutmaster Barrett, fought in World War II. And when he came back he founded our troop in the Light of the World Church. The tradition has been to search for the German Karabiner clip he snatched off a dead Nazi in France. All I can give you, D.H., is a heading and a riddle.”

He walks over to D.H. and stuffs a piece of paper into his jeans pocket. He leans right next to his ear. “Go west,” he tells him.

The rest of the troop is smiling. D.H. hates most of them, especially Elias and Flack, Riess’ little sycophants. Queeg has only one last thing to say, “Good luck.” He slaps D.H. on the shoulder, but D.H. reacts so much that Queeg jumps around screaming, “Flinchies! Flinchies!” And he punches D.H. on the shoulder. “One two three,” one after the other. “You’ll be off first thing in the morning.”

D.H. unravels the piece of paper from his pocket. It says, *find the missing shade of blue*. It’s supposed to be a hint.

“What is this?”

“That’s what you gotta find out.” Queeg tells him. “And get it before the end of the week. We need an extra member of the pack for the battle.”

“The battle—” D.H. begins, but Reginald cuts him off.

“Hey, what’s that thing you had earlier?”

“What?”

“The thing you put up against your mouth.”

“My inhaler?”

“Right. Lemme see it.”

The rest of the pack is suddenly very curious.

“You’re supposed to report that to the med people, D.H.,” Riess tells him.

“Well, I need it,” D.H. says.

Queeg seizes the moment. He snatches D.H.’s bag. D.H. reaches for it, but Riess grabs him by the arms to hold him back.

Queeg digs through the pack. He tosses a roll of toilet paper on the ground, pulls out a toothbrush, a block of soap, a compass, and a carabiner. All of it’s on the ground. Queeg nearly turns the pack over to shake everything out.

“Where the hell is it?”

D.H. struggles to get out of Riess’ grip but he’s way stronger than D.H.’ll ever be.

“Ah!” Queeg shouts. He pulls an inhaler out of the hidden pocket. He holds it up in the air. The pack marvels at its beauty, illuminated by the raging fire.

“One of these will get you pretty high,” Queeg says.

The scouts are intrigued.

“I need that—” D.H. begins.

“We need it too bud . . . Let’s try it out.”

Senior Eagle Scout Riess lets go of D.H. Riess marches straight over to Queeg and snatches it out of his hands. He puts the inhaler up to his mouth and pushes down on the canister. When it releases, he coughs and spits.

“The hell is this? Awful.” He throws the inhaler on the ground and D.H. runs over to grab it. But Reginald is much faster. He snatches it.

“Doin’ it wrong, man. Breathe in as you press down. Right D.H.?”

D.H. tries to grab it, but Reginald holds it high up in the air, far out of D.H.'s grasp. He jumps for it, but it's useless.

"Ha! Hey, little guy, that's how you do it, right?"

D.H. is defeated. He slumps down against a rock. He nods—yeah, that's how you do it.

"Right. My little bro has one of these."

Reginald breathes very heavy. He pushes all the air out of his lungs and shakes his hands. He takes the inhaler into his mouth and presses down on the canister, breathing in as the spray releases. He does this several times without stop for air.

"Yeah." He sets it down after ten hits. "Right on." He hands the inhaler to Pip who's standing next to him.

Before long, the entire pack has taken their share of puffs. They stand there a bit stupefied, giggling and unsure of these new sensations rippling through their bodies.

Queeg is lightheaded, and he stumbles around the fire, trying to find his knife. He trips over a rock and falls onto the grass, laughing out loud. Riess spots him, points a shaky finger at him. "Idiot!" he calls out before stumbling over and laughing with him. They roll around in each other's arms.

Reginald and Pip have begun a dancing line. They skip around the fire: Reginald's hands are on Pip's shoulder, and he's chanting. It's slow and repetitive, and they're speaking complete nonsense. The rest of the pack starts to chant along. They yell and scream, slapping their hands against their mouths like an Indian war cry. The intensity builds—they start running faster, yelling louder, imagining spears in their hands, and they hurl them through the air to skewer a passing buffalo. Reginald calls himself "Runs with Wolf"; he grabs Pip by the waist and throws

him over the fire. Riess “Travels with Bear” catches him, just barely, and lifts him above his head. Pip starts yelling and screaming, and Riess almost drops him in the fire. He saves Pip from falling completely, and sets him down in the grass nearby. Several times through the night, he reminds the scouts of his membership within the Order of the Arrow.

All the while, D.H. has moved away from the pit. He lies in the grass to sleep, but the pack is so loud that it’s just not going to happen. He wonders what’s going on with the whole pack—he doesn’t even know what it means to “get high.” Plus, he’s taken far more than ten doses of his inhaler before and hasn’t felt any different at all.

The night passes like this, until the pack loses energy and falls asleep next to the fire on the ground. D.H. pulls into himself to keep out the cold, praying that he doesn’t have an asthma attack.



Bugling



Hiking



Home Repairs

Chapter Five

The Tents: Sixth of July, Morning

First thing in the morning, the bugle boy plays a botched version of Reveille inciting groans from scouts all across the camp grounds. One of them yells, “Quit torturing so many pigs!” The bugle boy sputters, struggles for breath, then continues the noise, all for the sake of roll call. D.H.’s hair is mussed from lying on the ground all night; his back is stiff, and his hands are covered in dirt. He looks down at his jeans—there’s a wet spot over his crotch. He ventures towards his tent and finds an extra pair of pants. The other scouts are just waking up, so he changes as fast as he can. He leaves his old pants at the bottom of his duffel bag.

The morning air is cold and the horizon is a stunning arrangement of pinks and purples. The bugle boy continues his blasting and braying until Senior Eagle Scout Riess emerges from his tent and yells, “That’s enough!” The scouts rise from sleep and wander out to the meeting area where Scoutmaster Barrett is looking as spry as ever: His uniform is firmly pressed and wrinkle-free; his face is cleanly shaven (except for a thin pencil mustache); and his buckle is almost to his belly button, which leaves an unfortunate bulge in his tan shorts.

He calls out to the scouts, “Good”—with a long and drawn-out emphasis on the “oo”—“morning campers!” He paces back and forth. D.H. feels like he’s hardly slept. Sleep on the cold, hard ground is hardly sleep at all. He stumbles, walking to the assembly. After all the

scouts have emerged from their tents and lined up in their packs, Scoutmaster Barrett begins the morning ritual.

He leads them in the pledge: “Honor the Texas flag of 1836. I pledge allegiance to thee. Texas, one and indivisible.” A few scouts are unfurling the flag, and hooking it on its clips. They pull the wire and it lifts it into the air. The wind picks up and the Texan flag flaps against the breeze. “Scout salute!” All the boys hold their hands, fingers stiff and straight, up to their eyebrows. D.H. loses focus and stares at a badge sewn to Scoutmaster Tuning’s shirt: it’s the United States seal—the oak branch, the olive branch, the liberty cap, and the crossing fasces. The meeting goes as usual.

After they break, they crowd onto four long, wooden benches. They’re old and cracked, and they bow under the weight of all the scouts. They set up at the crest of a hill, a short walk from the camp. It overlooks a few miles of the Rio Frio which winds through the trees. The sun has scaled the edge of the hills and touches of pink line the clouds above. The scoutmasters arrive with sheet pans of food. They unload piles of imitation eggs and chewy bacon onto community plates. The scoutmasters (and a few unlucky Senior Eagle Scouts) had huddled around tiny petroleum burners at five in the a.m. to prepare food for the entire troop. And when they unload breakfast, the troop battle each other for space on the table. If any of them try to steal the food before it’s unloaded, the scoutmasters kick them out. D.H. has finally discovered that if he sits on the very edge of a table, the struggle for food is not so difficult. He sneaks a few pieces of chewy bacon and a mound of egg-colored product onto his plate before it disappears, and the savages scramble over one another for the remaining sustenance.

After breakfast, they are sent on their way. Dragon Pack ventures towards merit badge lessons, but after Eagle Scout Riess leaves the pack to Queeg, they are off to the woods in the opposite direction. Queeg produces his arrowhead from his back pocket and slaps it into D.H.'s hand.

“Have it.” D.H. feels the edges which are sharp, and he drops it in his pocket.

“You have your clue?”

D.H. opens the piece of paper and reads it over a few times. No matter how many times he examines it, the meaning doesn't become any more transparent. But he holds it up to the rest of the pack and they nod in assent.

“Best of luck soldier.”

Queeg punches D.H. in the shoulder. D.H. tries to protest—he almost takes a swing at Queeg himself—but the rest of the pack socks him in the shoulder one by one. They smile as they do it. It seems very natural and it all happens so mechanically that D.H. figures it's some time-honored ritual, another mysterious bit of hazing that he can't grasp. It's all very strange and put-on. He wonders why no one ever stops to question it, question the original scout who wrote all the rules; does it even make coherent sense? Pondering it, D.H. takes the beating. They turn away and file up the hill. He rotates his shoulder to ease the pain but it only makes it sharper like someone jabbing a knife in it. He reads the paper a third time. He pulls out his compass and heads in the direction it says is west.

* * *

D.H. first heard about masturbation in the sixth grade when Joe Freighter snuck a nudie mag into school, and everyone crowded around him at recess. There was a whole pack of boys

huddled underneath the slide. They sat in the gravel of the play-pit fawning over what was inside. D.H. could only see a sliver of a page from that angle, and he couldn't get closer to see what was really there. There were too many boys crowded around, so he just heard the sound of them hooing and haaing. His imagination filled in the rest. When they were called inside, D.H. approached Joe, and demanded he describe it.

"They have these things like us." He pointed to his chest. "But they're much bigger and darker. And down there, there's a big hole where our things are." He flashed D.H. a page. D.H. felt warm. Joe asked, "Has your thing every got big?" And D.H., not knowing whether his thing ever had gotten big or not (or what that even meant), shook his head. "C'mon! Everyone's thing gets hard and it feels good to rub it. It happens a whole lot."

That night D.H. tried in vain to get his thing hard and when it made the slightest stir, he tried to stroke it. He kept at it for about an hour, picturing the nudie page Joe'd flashed. He imagined the woman without clothes; her legs crossed to cover her private bits and she held a long, orange popsicle; her lips lay plush against it, and her other hand squeezed her chest. He could feel it then: his thing was definitely getting hard. He didn't realize all the noise he was making. He was breathing hard and the bed creaked when he moved. It was all cut short when his mother knocked open the door, and looked inside. D.H. hadn't shut it all the way, and light poured into the room from the outside hall, illuminating his dirty deed. The sheets were pushed to the bottom of the bed and D.H. was naked from head to toe, sweating all over. "Oh my!" his mother yelled. She slammed the door behind her. D.H. dove under the covers and burst into tears. He felt the shame like a boiling vat of acid sloshing around in his stomach.

They didn't talk about it, and D.H. wouldn't made eye contact with her for a week. Finally, his Dad sat him down. He was polishing off a beer and sighing a great deal.

"Listen bud." D.H. was ready to bolt. "Your mother told me about the other night . . . Hey don't run off. Stay. You ain't got nothing to be shamed of, okay? It's totally natural. Just be a little more quiet next time . . . You got it? Don't get caught."

D.H. didn't know whether to feel better or not. In a way it was worse because he'd gotten away with it. He vowed never to masturbate for the rest of his life. Every time he thought of it, he remembered his mother's face, the boiling acid crawling along his insides. This lasted a few years until he was violently shoved in puberty, and the sight of Sally Horner—the little lady who had developed at a faster rate than her peers—drove him mad. He found sweet relief in the privacy of the shower.

* * *

The spread of land before him: it's beautiful, certainly. The paths are easy to follow and you can always see (or hear) the mighty Rio Frio while walking amid the piebald shade beneath the trees. There are choruses of birds which flutter around him, and the music of grasshoppers is constant, a solid presence of white noise.

But D.H.'s journey is totally fruitless—he spends over an hour at a chipped, blue sign that reads, "Do NOT Feed Anything." D.H. uses his mini shovel to dig the dirt around the sign. He shakes it. He kicks it. He loses his temper for a moment and curses. He takes back the expletive and apologizes.

Eventually he gives up, and almost rips his little paper to shreds. "The missing shade of blue," whatever that meant, was totally unhelpful—completely misleading.

He pounds his fists into the ground to regain his cool. He feels the dirt in his hands, and vows not to cry.

He strolls further down the path. The scenery is enough, he figures. The temperature has dropped, and the sun has begun its descent, so the walk becomes less arduous.

Soon, he runs into a huge gathering of scouts. The “road” that he’s taken is a major path that connects two sides of the Troop 459 campground: Cub and Boy Scouts. D.H. had covered a full mile in his walk; he approaches a major crossroads where the two paths meet. Once he hears the sound of them, D.H. scurries off the path and hides behind a tree.

D.H. has stumbled upon a massive congregation of Cub Scouts who are shuffling in an imperfect line towards the Barrett amphitheater. They’re all less than ten years old and even though he has a few years on them, they look so young, bearing all the marks of youth: They periodically jump up and down; they squeal; their voices crack, and they make fake guns with their hands—“shoot” one another. He notices that Senior Eagle Scout Jon has been assigned to them and he fights them to stay in line. D.H. sneaks along to follow. Soon, the trees fall away and they’re in a large clearing near the amphitheater. Senior Eagle Scout Jon tries to coax a Cub Scout into leading them in prayer.

“God will be so happy when you do it,” Jon insists.

“Prayer is stupid!”

“Please, you have to do this; everyone does it.”

“That’s not true!”

Senior Eagle Scout Jon is about to lose his patience, feeling the urge to hit one of them upside the head. D.H. waits for them all to pass, then he crawls off the trail. He can hear them as

they disappear through the amphitheater doors. The doors are made of old pine and the knockers are covered in rust. D.H. remembers it place vividly. He had spent several miserable days inside it when he was a Cub Scout. They would sit along the concrete slabs they use for seats, which are laid out in several rows and elevated above a small stage. They'd sit on those cold, uncomfortable slabs, fidgeting, and he'd count the seconds until they could leave. There was sure to be some Senior Eagle Scout or Scoutmaster failing to conjure up enthusiasm from the crowd. D.H. would never participate and he'd always get lectured for it. The Arrow of Light could not come any sooner.

But now he has found a tree to lie against. He cradles his inhaler in his hand and listens to the sounds coming from the amphitheater.

"All right scouts! Here were are. Another beautiful day at Camp Garner. Can I get a woooooo?"

"Wooooo!" a chorus of preadolescent voices erupt.

"That's right! So, Campers, Scouts. I heard there's supposed to be a rainstorm tonight. Woah! Right? But I figured we could make some weather right here, right now! How does that sound? Do you know how to make some weather?"

D.H. shakes his second inhaler (the one he, thankfully, found buried under everything else in his backpack) and he can hear that the liquid inside is almost gone. He swings his pack around and finds a full canister. He pops it out of the plastic sheath and inserts a new one. He compresses the nozzle several times and breathes deep.

"That's right campers! You do know! How about rubbing your hands together, just like . . . this. Got it?"

“Shshshshshshshs,” the Senior Eagle Scout mimics the sound. The hands, remarkably, do sound something like the wind.

“Right on, Scouts! I think I hear the wind. Great job.”

D.H. presses the canister and releases as much of that gas as his lungs could hold.

“Wait a minute, Scouts! Is that rain I hear?” He lowers his voice. “Tap you fingers, Scouts!”

They tap away on their knees. It emulates the pitter-patter of rainfall.

“Thunder?”

Then they stomp their feet on the ground—a large collective rumble.

“I think it’s getting closer, Scouts!”

A few adventurous scouts slap their hands together to imitate the crack of lightning.

“It’s over our heads right now!”

“Boom!” exclaims one of them.

The collective percussion of feet, hands, and voices hit a crescendo and just before they finish, D.H. takes a few more puffs from his inhaler. He puts it back in his pack, tingling from it all. The Senior Eagle Scout belts over the noise, “And it’s suddenly gone!”

Half the crowd falls silent while a few others take a minute to realize that their friends have gone quiet.

“Awesome job, Scouts!”

D.H. lays his head in a small nook formed by the wood of the tree. He falls asleep almost right away. He misses out on the Cub Scout prayer.

* * *

D.H.'s father never cared about religion all that much. He never took D.H. to church, or forced him to pray, but he did have traditions and rituals that he maintained from childhood. Like, they said grace before every meal together. His father said that it felt strange that they wouldn't. It was like the food wasn't right if they didn't and he couldn't bear to force down a single bite of food until they had offered their small pittance to the Lord their Father.

Once his father had bought a large slab of T-bone steak because he had gotten a bonus at work, but when he cooked the meat, he burned the hell out of a few of them and left the others bleeding. He moaned about the damn grill and how one side was way hotter than the other. This was true; D.H. had felt the difference holding his hand above the burning charcoal. D.H.'s father mopped up the blood from the steak with a piece of bread and handed it to him. "Eat it. It's good for you." D.H. took the blood-soggy piece of bread and forced it down. It was salty and tasted like metal.

"That's it! Puts meat on your bones." D.H.'s father flexed for him and he saw the muscles expand like a balloon. "We should hit the weights—maybe it'll get you a girlfriend."

"Jackson." D.H.'s mom said.

"What? You're gonna sit there and say that this ain't it, right here?" D.H.'s father slapped his arms and winked at her. "Don't worry about it D., okay? It's a lot easier than it looks."

There was a long period of silence. D.H. munched on his steak, let it soak in his mouth.

"Dad, why don't we ever get to talk to God?"

"The hell did that come from?"

"Just wondering. Other people talk with God, but I don't ever hear from him."

“I don’t know bud. Strange question. But, doesn’t do you much good to dwell on it. Not worth your time. No one is ever really going to know answers to that kind of shit. How about those weights, though?” His father waited for his mother’s approval. She nodded. “All right! Let’s get yoked.”

They left the table with all the dishes and their dinner half-eaten. D.H.’s father showed him the way to his prized collection.

“See this right here. Great for toning.” He took a ten pound barbell and lifted it between his fingers in front of him. “It’ll work your delts . . . Don’t let anyone fool you. It’s quantity over quality. You do a lot—not a ton all at once. That’s how you hurt yourself. That’s how you get a bad back when you’re twenty-five. Just do a lot of a little. Tiny progress, incremental progress.”

D.H. grabbed a thirty pound barbell and was shocked to find how heavy it was in his hands. He exerted a considerable amount to lift it.

“No no.” His father rushed over to him. “This is how you get hurt. Smaller. And like this.” His father grabbed a five pounder and stuck it in D.H.’s hand. He curled D.H.’s arm for him until he left go. Then D.H. was able to do it on his own.

His father ran over to his bar with the big weights. He lay down and pumped it several times. His face went red. He pursed his lips, forcing out a big bout of air with every rep.

“Shit—forgot the music. How about some Dylan?” His father nodded to himself. “Yup, of course.”

While he fiddled with the CD’s, D.H. had wandered over to where his father had just been. There was the indent of his body in the rubber-plastic cushion. D.H. lay in it and looked at the ceiling. The bar was huge from down there, especially with the way he lay—his face directly

underneath it. D.H. held up his arms and grabbed a hold of it. He could barely reach it as it was, let alone push it any higher. It was like pressing his hands against a concrete wall. D.H. closed his eyes and imagined that he could lift it like it was a flimsy piece of balsa wood.

By the time his father came out of the room, and Bob Dylan was singing the opening line of “Jokerman,” it was too late. The bar had already slipped out of its right notch, and when it fell, half the bar dropped on little D.H.’s face. It walloped D.H. directly in the eye.

Maybe if his father had gotten him to stop screaming, his mother wouldn’t have had such a panic attack and sent him to the emergency room. When they arrived, the receptionist recognized them at once. She raised an eyebrow at the crying child. His mother had to explain away another questionable injury. A call almost had to be made, but D.H. (after he’d stopped crying) explained what had happened, his eye the size of a melon.

At home, D.H. hardly left his room, and his father tried to make peace several times. D.H. pretended to be asleep every time he knocked.

That Sunday they went to church for the first time in a very long time. D.H.’s father looked uncomfortable and antsy for most of it, and D.H. didn’t understand much of what the preacher had said throughout. He focused, for the entirety of the sermon, on the hypnotic thurible, swaying back and forth.

The drive home was silent, until D.H.’s father finally spoke. “Those damn priests think they know everything huh?”

“Why, because they said you ain’t supposed to drink?” His mother was quick to retort.

“Yeah.” He turned to D.H. “So what do you say, huh? Gotta get back to the workout. Just got Dylan’s Basement Tapes.”

D.H. shrugged and looked at the street outside. His eye was still swollen, the black and blue around it like a bad painting.

After his father left, D.H. would go downstairs now and then, hoist up a few weights, then set them back.



Cooking



Reading



American Heritage

Chapter Six

Sixth of July, Evening: Barrett Amphitheater

D.H. can feel the pillow under his head. He stares at the soft clouds of his wallpaper. The smell of grilling meat wafts through his window and he makes out the sound of the fat sizzling and popping against the hot flames of the grill. He can feel the heat of the charcoal. Above the sounds of his father grilling, he can hear his own name, calling him out of bed, starting low, a whispering siren, then gradually getting louder, until his whole body starts to shake, the sound of those two letters “D.H.” ricocheting in his head, between his ears; and then: he’s awake.

Leaves sick to his hair, and his head and neck ache from leaning against the bark of the tree. He opens his eyes: it’s bright and the sunlight drowns out the figure above him, the one that’s been shaking him.

“Up up D.H. now!”

D.H. moans and straightens himself, leaning back on the palms of his hands. He sees Scoutmaster Barrett. Directly behind him is Senior Eagle Scout Jon. His arms are crossed and he taps his foot.

“Scoutmaster. I have to get going.”

“Certainly. You’re fine. Go ahead. Thank you for getting me.”

Scoutmaster Barrett looks back at D.H.

“On your feet, Scout. Time to go.” He grabs D.H. by the arms and hoists him up. D.H. tries to brush all the dirt off his shorts but Scoutmaster Barrett grabs his shoulder.

“Don’t even bother. There’s an emergency back at camp.”

They run back through the forest to the other side of the camp. Scoutmaster Barrett grabs his hand to urge him along.

“What were you doing?”

“Not sure.”

“Not sure? Why weren’t you at your merit badge classes? You missed canoeing! No one misses canoeing.”

“I’m sorry.” D.H. rubs his shoulder, but Scoutmaster Barrett pulls him further. He’s in a serious hurry.

“Such a shame. Canoeing was my favorite merit badge . . . We need you back at camp, D.H. C’mon.”

They head back the way D.H. came, through the trail in the trees. Scoutmaster Barrett picks up the pace to a jog, saying, “Hurry up. Don’t make me hold your hand,” and he has to look back at D.H. every few minutes to make sure that he’s keeping up. The sun descends towards the horizon. One tree blends into the next; one rushing by the other.

When they get back to the camp it’s almost completely dark.

“Over here.” Scoutmaster Barrett takes him to the Quartermaster’s tent. Stub emerges from under the flap with a clipboard in his hands. He shoves it into D.H.’s chest.

“You filled this out, right?”

“I’m not sure . . . What—”

“Nope. Right before we left. We were in the parking lot and it was your job to check everything off this list.”

“Okay.”

“Why is the paraffin jelly crossed off, huh?”

“I don’t know.”

“You marked it off. Look at the list.”

“This isn’t my fault.”

“You marked it off! Why did you mark it off!?”

D.H. can’t remember.

“This is a serious issue, D.H.” Scoutmaster Barrett cuts in. “We have an entire troop to feed. We need the jelly to heat everything: pots, pans, you name it. Fueling those lighters are essential. It’s getting dark and the whole troop hasn’t eaten dinner . . . Look, ah stop, don’t cry or anything. We can fix this. All the Eagle Scouts have started bonfires, and we’re trying to devise a way to keep cooking. Go to them. Now. Go fix this.”

D.H. wipes his eyes and nods. “Where?”

“That’s a way. Other side of camp.”

He walks in that direction, ignoring everyone around him. They’re all moaning and pleading for food. The scouts lie on their backs clawing at the sky, imaging that they have a burger in their hands, or that they’re dipping French Fries into ketchup. Word has spread that D.H. botched the Quartermaster’s list, so they give him the death glare. D.H. tries to pick up the pace, but every scout in Troop 459 fixes their eyes on him. He cowers. He stuffs his hands in his pocket. And dips his head. He finds an old pack of gum buried in his coat. He pulls out a stick and looks it over. A smile breaks across his face, and he turns for the trees.

On the other side of camp, four or five holes have been dug into the ground. Each Eagle Scout tends to their own burgeoning fire but none of them have amounted to anything significant. Senior Eagle Scout Riess struggles to get the kindling to ignite. He doesn't have enough of it to get started, and nothing to keep it going. A few of them are hitting rocks against one another, spraying bare sparks into the pile of wood. None of it catches. They're all grunting and cursing, unable to get any fire to ignite.

D.H. sprints out of the trees with a pile of twigs in his arms. He's furiously chewing a whole wad of gum in his mouth. He's stuck almost the entire pack in there. He lines up the sticks next to one another and pulls a long string of blue-bubbly stuff out of his mouth. He wraps it around the middle of the bundle to pull it all together. He nearly finishes one off. The gum isn't sticking perfectly so he rips more of it from his mouth, and shores up the the wood that's falling off. After getting one to stay together, he shoves it into the ground in front of him. The Senior Eagle Scouts have noticed. They stop beating their rocks together and stop digging for extra kindling.

Senior Eagle Scout Riess walks straight up to D.H. He sees him with the sticks and the gum. He's already made a few of them. D.H. looks up at Senior Eagle Scout Riess with a big grin offering up his new packages of kindling. Senior Eagle Scout Riess has a strange look, like he doesn't know what the hell is happening, which is confusing considering that the idea came directly from him—but then, after the realization has set in, Riess starts to laugh. It's a small chuckle at first, but eventually he's shaking his head, wiping his eyes, keeling over. D.H. notices that the other Senior Eagle Scouts get the joke too and they join in the chorus of laughter.

Senior Eagle Scout Jon bear hugs Riess, slapping him on the back. “You told him that story!”

D.H. gets it. He stands and turns away before they can even see him tear up. He kicks the gum-sticks at his standing audience, but it doesn’t hit any of them. Some of the gum gets stuck to D.H.’s shoe, so he jumps on one foot, trying to kick it off with the other one. He has to drag it through the grass and mud which only adds to the comedic performance. They start applauding, cheering for more. “Bravo! Bravo!” But by then, D.H. has made for the trees, past his tent and campsite. He sees Reginald and Pip huddled by an overturned crate. They have a deck of cards out and they’re slapping the cards as they lay them down: Egyptian Rat Screw. They holler out to D.H. but he doesn’t listen; he’s off to get anywhere but the Troop 459 campsite. A few miles away, there are more troops, different scouts and different Pack Leaders, no Queeg or Riess or Scoutmaster Barrett; even if they all went to “war” at the end of the week—whatever that meant—it wasn’t worth it.

It’s completely dark by this point, and he runs into low-hanging branches. The brambles stick into the corner of his eye and the leaves get caught in his hair. He tries to pull it out, kick the stupid roots poking out of the ground and even the dandelions peeking from the grass. He leads a Sherman’s march through the woods, killing everything in his path, and when he winds up his leg against a big thick root, he gets his foot caught underneath. He goes tumbling through the woods, landing flat on his back. The tears pour freely now, his breathing too fast to get any oxygen down. He forgets about his inhaler; he just sits there taking it all in. Maybe his breath will just give out and he can drift off and forget about it all.

“Who’s that?”

He hears the voice of an old man. D.H. tries to erase the tears from his face. He looks around.

“I hear you. I’ve got a pistol.”

D.H. runs towards the voice. “No. No. I’m lost.” He clears through some more branches and finds a small fire pit. Over it, there’s a metal rack for grilling. D.H. sees an old man with his pistol drawn in front of him. D.H. notices his thinning white hair and his extra-large glasses. It’s Scoutmaster Tuning. His hands are shaking and he can barely keep the pistol drawn in front of him.

“What are you doing?”

“Lost. Just lost,” D.H. says.

It takes a while for Tuning to understand. He puts down his pistol.

“Scared the hell outta me.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just sit down. Don’t make so much noise anymore.”

“Okay.” D.H. sits next to the fire to warm his hands. He feels tempted to put them right in there.

“You crying?”

“No sir.”

“Looks like it.” Scoutmaster Tuning pulls out a hotdog (prepackaged from the store) and sets it on the metal rack. “You’re hungry at least, right?” D.H. nods, and he throws another one on the grill.

They sit in total silence, watching the fire slowly cook the hotdogs. Every now and then Scoutmaster Tuning makes a grunt, readjusts his seat and forces gas out his behind. But he's not much in the way of talking, which is nice because after enough time has passed, D.H. can relax. He scoots closer to the fire and leans against one of the rocks.

Scoutmaster Tuning finishes the first hot dog and puts it between a loaf of bread. He hands it to D.H. who eats it half of it in one bite.

Tuning joins him.

"Better?" he asks.

D.H. nods.

"You're the silent one, that's right." Scoutmaster Tuning opens his mouth to speak, but loses his thought. He eats the last of the hotdog instead.

"You'll feel better to open up."

"Why?"

"Hard to say why. It just does."

"All right."

"Well, what is it?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

"That's a heavy one. But you might have to be a little more specific for me."

"Riess told this story about gum and these sticks—"

"He told that one?"

"Yeah?"

"That's been a Troop 459 classic. Terrific story."

“Oh.”

“So?”

“Well, I tried to make them anyway.”

“Ha! You’ve got to learn how to discriminate a little. Can’t believe everything you hear.”

“I guess not.”

“Careful with people who tell a lot of stories. Probably as hard to tell what’s true as it is to tell the truth. You know?”

“I don’t.”

“That’s just the nature of stories.”

“This entire troop is a joke. I don’t want to be here. I hate it. Everyone is stupid.”

“I hope you don’t mean that entirely, D.H. I’ve been with this troop since always.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“You’ll be fine. What merit badges you getting?”

“I haven’t. They made me ditch all my lessons.”

“That’s right. They do that.”

“Badges are stupid too.”

“Not always. I have quite a few badges that I’m proud of. Specially ones from combat.”

“Combat?”

“Sure. But I have whole boxes full of them. I got too many to keep on my uniform.”

“This is stupid.”

“Not really, D.H. and I’d think of another word to use besides stupid. I was in a platoon. Little bit like your packs now. We were one of the few platoons to get our own badges, and they

gave us these ones because we were called the Bluejays all the time. Don't know exactly how that came about, but it stuck and they'd call us that. So eventually some of the CO's got us all these circular badges that were all blue all over it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Badges from war. We got them after basic, so there weren't many that lasted. I lasted until January of 1945 and I got so burned they had to pull me off the line and throw me in surgery. But not before I got laid up in a holding area because they had no where to take the injured. I just had to lie in this big church that was covered, every square inch of that floor, with injured bodies. Not much to do but lie there waiting to die. I had a little window nearby, and all I could see were the huge Pine trees outside. Little bit like this forest around us. But see, the trees were together really thick there—so thick you couldn't see much past your own foxhole. These trees here—there're hardly any at all. It's a little different when you can't barely see or hear your C.O. You don't know forest 'til you've been there."

D.H. realizes that Tuning is just getting into it.

"I remember this one son of a bitch, what was his name . . . Silva. Right, see he was the Lieutenant and led the company. Well, supposedly he led the company. Whenever things got hairy, he'd run off. 'Going for a walk,' he'd say. He'd disappear—God knew where. But that was the thing. When artillery'd come in, you'd just have you and whoever else was crammed into that tiny foxhole. Those first couple days specially—with the snow coming down, and you didn't see none of the sky. And between the explosions you'd hear a call for a medic, and you'd curl deeper into yourself in that hole. Just thank God you weren't a medic.

“Sometimes you’ve just gotta accept what’s going on right then. One day, I’m planning our Christmas. Me and this buddy I had—we’d joke about our Christmas presents. I used to talk about how I’d got him something grand—a big red sweater sewn by the misses, which was doubly false, because we were both too damn young. We’d hardly been kissed before we enlisted. That was it too—no one asked how old you were. If you weren’t enlisting, then something was wrong with you. Something real bad. I remember my brother signing up in 1941. And I didn’t tell my family, but I was there too—still in high school. And none of the recruiters said a word. I barely had hair on my chin but there I was, holding a rifle in my hand for the first time.

“Anyway, me and this buddy—we and the rest of the 101st, were all taking it easy north in Holland, when orders come down from the big fellas upstairs. We’re moving out right then. It was a Sunday I think. Right in the afternoon and only a week before Christmas. You don’t really know what’s going on. You just pile onto that truck, stuffed as far as they could and we get thrown right into it.

“We come to this town—Bastogne. Everything’s destroyed. The buildings are caved in. There are fires everywhere. There’s a long line of soldiers running in the opposite direction. We steal the ammo off of ‘em. And they’re happy to part with all of it.

“And what are you gonna do? You don’t join ‘em—run the opposite directions. It’s terrible. We go running into the forest a few miles from town and dig in. One time, me and my buddy light a cigarette. We don’t have any winter clothing. No proper socks, those damn army-issue shoes they’d give us. No galoshes, nothing. You’re freezing your behind. So we light up a cigarette. Get a little fire inside. Well, wouldn’t you know. Those Krauts catch sight of the smoke

curling off that little ember, and soon enough three mortars are whizzing through the air. You don't hear it 'til it's right above you. The first two just nailed the tree next to my head. Wood splinters go everywhere—they rip holes through my trousers. I lose all control of my legs. I hit the ground, my hands on my head. But that third one, it gets right behind my buddy. There he was: this pile of earth flies up his backside and his body's launched a few yards in the other direction. I grab him, and try to pull him up. I scream for a medic and he gets taken off in a stretcher. Didn't see him ever again.

“But you don't really ask about it. And you don't make any more buddies after that, is what you do. And soon they've got me on mortar duty. But we're so close, they just stick the mortar tube between my legs. We spot a few Krauts approaching the tree line where we're all dug in. They throw a shell down the tube. Then it's a big *thump* and the mortar sails through the air. You can see where it lands, couple hundred yards in front of you, so I just lean back and forth like that to gauge distance—and that's how we kept them back.

“We'd only been there a week or so before we're told we're surrounded. And whenever they pulled the injured off the line, they'd just stick 'em in empty buildings in Bastogne, and they'd only get iodine. So they'd just squirt a bunch of iodine in you and that was it. I remember hours staring at the sky in my foxhole. The cloud cover wouldn't lift at all. And you'd just wait for some blue to peek out behind those clouds, but it'd never come. There's only so much cold, hunger, and no sleepin' that you can handle. I'd imagine seeing little things dance about in the clouds. I'd laugh to myself a little bit because you'd see Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland dance across the sky. But that never lasted long. Whoever else was in the foxhole'd think I'd really lost it. 'Course I hadn't but you've gotta do what you can. Specially when you'd see the glint of

Judy's necklace arch across the sky, and it's an artillery shell burning through the sky. You'd hear a scream, 'incoming!' and everyone'd drop everything and dive for the nearest hole in the ground. It was its own dance.

"What's this all about? Right. So, there was this captain from a couple companies over. D or E, I don't remember really but he'd gotten quite the reputation. Stories'd spread everywhere about him and we'd believe it. Story goes that he finds this truck full of Kraut P.O.W.'s This is back in Normandy in 1944. He walks over, opens the flap and tells them 'Hey guess what? I'll make'a deal. I've got a few cases of French wine—Cabernet. I get you a case and we talk. Just talk.'

"The Krauts all agree so he watches all of them drink their heart's content. It isn't some hour after though, and he drives the truck a few miles down the road. He whips his Thompson off his shoulder and riddles 'em with bullets.

"It gets around, this story. And he never comes out to deny it. I never knew his name, but I knew his face. Someone else in my platoon had a picture of him to show along with his story. It lent some credibility.

"So of course, we're in Bastogne on the front line. All we do is dig holes deeper, cut the branches off trees to cover the holes we dig. I'm making mine deeper, and I see some poor guy trying to dig with his bare hands. He's got his whole body in it and he must've bloodied up his fingers real good. So I go running down the line, and put my shovel in the ground in front of him. He falls back and he's got tears in his eyes and his shirt's all covered in his blood. Real mess. And of course we hear a faint whistle on the air. Once again, someone screams, 'incoming,' and we go sprinting for the closest place to take cover. I don't even pretend to go for

the tiny clump I've dug in front of me. I run at full speed down the line. Shrapnel's everywhere. Mounds of earth lift into the air. I see a shell go straight through the hull of a tree and it lands on the opposite side on the ground. Doesn't do anything but just smoke there. Can't stop to stare at it. I get the hell out of there. And then I find it: an open foxhole. I dive head first and curl up as tight as I can. My helmet's gone and there's all kinds of dirt and ice in my hair. Freezing as hell but I don't notice much since there's explosions going on everywhere. My head's so much buried in my hands that I don't even notice that same Captain in the same damn foxhole that I'd dove into. And he's not buried in the dirt like me. He's sitting upright, a cigarette in his mouth, watching everything go on around him. Crazy sunuva. Piece a shrapnel could easy have come take his head off. So I yell at him to get his head down, but he doesn't hear me. Or he's just ignorin' me. Whatever happened, he sat there until he finished the cigarette, then relit a new one and went on like that. And that shelling was the worst. Lost a lot of men when they came and it didn't stop for the entire night. The closest to us was a shell that struck the middle of the trunk and sent splinters everywhere. Of course, the Captain next to me doesn't flinch even after it goes off. I look at where he is, and there's pieces of wood all around him, and none of it's touched him, none at all. When the shelling finally stopped, I asked him if he was crazy or something or if he had a death wish but he just shakes his head, laughs it off. He says it's not about being crazy or brave or anything like that. He just says, 'Nature does it to ya. Makes it so that you're not afraid.' It's what happened to you. It just got to where death didn't mean anything anymore. I hardly fired a weapon that whole time. I just took up space in the dirt. Not dying was all that I ever did in the way of fighting.

“That time I was so shook up, I thought I’d ask the Captain if any of the stories about him were actually true. He just laughed and smoked his cigarette some more. He finally says to me, he says, ‘Does it even matter?’ I didn’t know what to say so I just says, ‘Sure—pretty scary stories.’ And he laughs again. He shook his head and tells me that there isn’t much to be afraid of, because we were in a war, more likely to get killed than not. And then he says, anyway, that every story is made up, even if it’s true. Never forget it because the minute he finishes saying it, a shell comes down right over our heads. I heard the whistle but only for a split-second. Must have been one of the stray ones. Or when they wait for everyone to come out of their foxholes and save the injured. I swear I felt it brush against my cheek as it descended on us. It hits the opposite side of the hole and cuts the Captain directly in half. The fire from it burned up the whole right side of my body. I was done for. I knew it. Half my body was burned and it felt like something was sticking out of my side. All I could do was look at my badge. Yeah, this one right here. The blue one for my platoon. The fire burned off the blue from the middle. You can only see the original color on the outside but it’s all ruined up the middle.”

It’s then that D.H. notices the badge pinned to Scoutmaster Tuning’s front pocket. It was once blue, the edges are the color that it had been before, but the middle has been burned clear off. It was a wonder that the badge still held together.

Scoutmaster Tuning smiles. “You’ve got something for me?”

D.H. nods. He digs the scraps from his pocket and hands the pieces of the note to him.

Scoutmaster Tuning undoes the clothespin that’s been pushed through the blue badge. He takes a last look at it before placing it into D.H.’s hands.

“All right then.”

D.H. holds onto the badge as if it's some sacred artifact. He opens the front pocket of his shirt and sets the badge inside, patting it with his hand to make sure it's safely inside. Then Scoutmaster Tuning picks a clip of ammo off the ground. He slaps it into D.H.'s hand.

"It'll get easier from here on out. Don't worry. Just remember, you can't believe everything people say to ya."

"I know," D.H. responds. He's ready to run back to camp so he's stood up and thrown his pack over his shoulder, but Scoutmaster Tuning doesn't look like he's finished quite yet.

"Everyone's telling stories—making things up all the time."

"Definitely."

"They're just words, you know?"

D.H. is confused. He's not sure whether to sit down or keep standing like that.

"I guess. I don't know."

"Sure you do. It's words, no end—"

But D.H. is far too anxious. He takes off before Scoutmaster Tuning has managed to say his whole sentence. He's tearing through the branches. Leaves twist into his mangy hair.



Inventing



Archery



Personal Fitness

Chapter Seven

Ninth of July, Afternoon: The West Slope

The first scouts to camp in Garner Park began a tradition that's been upheld every year on the last day of camp. Even Scoutmaster Barrett, the real scoutmaster Barrett, encouraged his one-pack troop to storm Lone Wolf Hill all those years back. It was more or less a disastrous charge but still a victory for overall morale. It inspired them to fight every year after. The winner gets the privilege of hoisting their flag thirty feet in the air on the metal flagpole at the center of the summit, where the flag will remain—barring any fatal weather conditions—throughout the year until it's contested again the next summer. As of this year, atop that pole, stirring slightly in the breeze, a red and black flag stands proudly, the numbers 459 stitched into it.

A year ago, Senior Eagle Scout Riess had led the final charge, mustering his best battle cry, channeling the power of his ancestors and he urged his scouts towards victory; it was Dragon Pack which spearheaded the charge into Troop 328, who was heavily entrenched along the ridge of the hill. Riess and his Dragon Pack hurled the last of their dirt clods into the fray, knocking out the first of the defenders. The remainder of the fight turned hand-to-hand, and the valiant scouts of Troop 459 wrested the hill from the enemy. Upon claiming it for their own, they hoisted the flag into the air, and held the fortress uncontested. Senior Eagle Scout Riess relished the fruits of their victory, bringing out an old flag which Queeg tied to a fallen tree branch, and they marched it through each campground (a four mile circle through Garner Park) for every troop in the area to see.

It's not a matter of pride, Senior Eagle Scout Riess insists, but rather for the unparalleled thrill—claiming that high ground to fend off the wolves which descend from every direction. Senior Eagle Scout Riess has gathered his pack for a huddle: Queeg sharpens a stick to a fine point, and Reginald compares the size of different logs. Senior Eagle Scout Riess has snatched a dirt clod and tosses it up and down in his right hand.

“The key to victory,” he continues, showing the dirt to everyone gathered around. “It's in the proper packing.” He bends over and pulls a shovel from his pack. He sticks it into the ground and digs up a clump of wet mud that's just below the surface. He packs it into a mound. D.H. has moved in front of Queeg to get a better view, but Queeg pushes him back a little with his arm.

“Ya'll got some twigs?” Senior Eagle Scout Riess looks up at Pip who's staring off into the sky. “Pip!” Pip snaps out of it, and grabs a handful of twigs from a tree branch behind him. He hands it to Riess and Riess mixes it in the mound.

“Also's important to add some grass. No one thinks of it, but you don't want it breaking apart in your hands. Look.” He rips up the grass, and tosses it in. “Then get both your hands in there like this.” And he molds the mud, sticks, and grass into a lopsided oval. “Now set it in the sun.” They've laid out a blue tarp with several of these strange balls that Riess has spent a few hours creating. “Got it? Questions? . . . Good.”

To avoid the dirt crumbling apart entirely in their hands when it's thrown—Troop 556's fatal mistake, the summer of '96, when, unprepared and disorganized, a Senior Eagle Scout issued the order to just “dig up” the dirt clods during combat—any troop hoping to be in any kind of contention for the hill, must pre-pack their dirt before heading off to battle. Competing theories have emerged throughout the years about what exactly made the clod most efficacious.

But everyone knows that it needs to meet several competing (almost contradictory) demands: one, that it be compact enough so that it could be thrown without instant disintegration; two, that it have the density required to maintain accuracy across several yards; and three (and most importantly) that it explode upon impact, causing the most spray-damage possible when it rains shrapnel upon nearby targets. Senior Eagle Scout Riess thinks he has devised the perfect formula, the most sensible balance between these three requirements, especially with his addition of the grass—one that, he claims, will outlive his career as a scout.

“The twigs give it the proper density, sure, but the grass is the magic. Keeps the dirt more solid—more compact. The grass holds it all together. Also it isn’t gonna be so compact that it won’t burst apart on the trees above the hill.” D.H.’s up to his wrists in mud, twigs, and dirt, mixing it into a big slurry on the ground before handing it off to Queeg, who is compacts it. D.H. tries to sort the piles into equal sizes so that the manufacture of each dirt clod will be perfectly uniform. Riess stops talking to occasionally fix his work and critique his mixing strategies.

“Any good battle is won before the first shot is fired. Keep it in mind.”

He paces back and forth along his troops to supervise. Pip occasionally flicks mud in Reginald’s direction, but Riess kicks him in the ribs. Pip moans and makes a big show of it. All the while D.H. thinks that this entire process is a big pile of bullshit. He pounds at the mud in front of him, spraying little flecks of it across his face. It’s all a stupid pile of shit, dirt, and river water.

“What the hell man?” Queeg says, his head over his shoulder; the mud sprinkles the small of his back. D.H.’s making a mess, giving up on the mud mixing.

“D.H.!” Riess runs over to him and grabs him by the arms, but D.H. elbows him in the stomach. Riess backpedals, almost falling over. “What the hell?”

“This is fucking retarded!”

Riess doesn’t think he’s heard D.H. say more than two words at once, let alone the f-word, so he just laughs.

“Don’t laugh. This is just a bunch of bullshit, isn’t it? Another stupid hazing. Look at me!” D.H. has mud dripping from his arms and it’s all over his shirt and pants. There’s a liberal coating of mud across his face. Queeg starts to laugh, finding the whole situation similarly absurd.

“Oh man, D.H. you gotta little . . . all over your—” Queeg motions towards his face, but before he can finish, D.H. shoves him over. Queeg flaps his hands like a flailing bird trying to catch his balance, but he falls into the oozing pile of mud behind him; he splashes in river water run off.

“Shit D.H., calm down!” Riess has regained his composure.

“Don’t tell me to calm down. What’s the joke, huh? Where’s the trick?”

“No trick at all. I swear.”

“You’re lying! Fucking dirt clods?! I’ve done everything you’ve asked. This should be over already.” He starts shaking all the mud off his hands, but it makes a mess—it splatters in every direction like brown blood bursting out of a wound. The other scouts jump out of the way. Queeg is still struggling to get up, and when he finally gets his back unstuck from the mud, he gets a mouthful of it, a few twigs too; he starts spitting like a madman. Reginald bites the bullet: he throws both arms around D.H.’s chest, getting mud all over his uniform. D.H. squirms and

twists, trying to break free, but Reginald (being twice his size) has him totally locked in. Riess wipes some of the mud from his face and smiles.

“D.H.” He walks up to him and stands a few inches from his face. D.H. looks like he’s ready to spit right on Riess’ face. “Lemme show you.”

Riess bends over and picks up one of the dirt clods that’s been cooking under the hot summer sun. He feels it in his hands. A few pieces break apart, but for the most part it retains its shape. He nods to himself, then motions for Reginald and Reginald releases him. D.H. takes a few uncertain steps in Riess’ direction. Riess grins, like he has some secret he’s about to reveal to the world. D.H. notices an opening in the trees; there’s a rectangular clearing and looks like a makeshift firing range. At the end, about sixty feet downrange, is a sign post that has dirt caked all over it. It looks like one of those signs that warns you of nearby wildlife. Riess holds the dirt clod at his side. D.H. and Reginald stand behind him. He lowers his head and closes his eyes. He takes two big breaths. He’s really making a show out of this. Suddenly, his eyes flash open and he hurls the dirt clod, grunting when he does. Miraculously, the dirt clump stays intact. It flies direct and straight like a baseball hurdling towards home plate. It arcs slightly at the end of its flight so that it catches the edge of the sign and explodes into massive cloud of dirt—a puff of smoke, twigs flinging in every direction. D.H. is impressed.

“See?”

D.H. nods.

“Good.”

“Give me one,” D.H. says.

“All right . . . sure.” Riess walks back to their dirt clod assembly line, and picks another one from off the mat. He handles it, and shakes it of its excess dirt. He walks back over to D.H. and slaps it into his hand.

“Go for it.”

D.H. puts it into his left hand to get a feel for it. It’s much lighter than a baseball, but there’s still something to it.

He fixes his eyes on the target, and studies it for a while.

“You gonna throw it?”

“Quiet.”

He closes his eyes and lets his shoulders drop. He hurls the dirt clod with his whole body, nearly flipping himself over in the process. Somehow, it doesn’t burst apart when he releases it; it doesn’t go straight to the ground; and it doesn’t sail over the target. Instead, it finds the sign, directly in the middle, and when the clod slams into the metal, there’s a terrific *bang* with the blunt force of it hitting the sign. A massive dirt cloud settles on the ground, and there’s a drawn-out silence as everyone absorbs what’s happened—D.H. especially.

“Well, shit,” Riess says. He walks over to the assembly line where production has halted completely; the pack has gathered to watch.

“Elias. Flack. Get to the mud pile. You guys are doing what D.H. was doing.”

They groan; they had been sitting on the hill, taking turns with D.H.’s inhaler (the one they still hadn’t given back to him), silently murmuring how high they’d been.

“Really?” says one of them.

“Now. Elias.”

“I’m Flack.”

“Whatever you fuckwit. Just go.”

Riess takes D.H.—putting an arm around his shoulder. “Hell of an arm you’ve got there bud.” D.H. wiggles out of his grasp.

“This is retarded.”

“Just trust me,” Riess insists. “Listen. . .”

Each troop starts a few miles from the hill, all equidistant from the epicenter, so that they form a circle, several miles in diameter, which collapses in on itself when they all charge towards the hill. They make their way in an approximate straight line, but given the geography—intermittent streams, boulders, and other topographical anomalies—each troop will often walk right past the hill, or (as is common) run into another troop heading in the same direction. Troop 843 made the ruinous mistake of both failing to scout the terrain ahead of time—thus leading them severely off-course—as well as marching as one unit, every pack side by side stumbling through the woods. All forty-four scouts ran straight into Cobra Pack, Troop 117—all of whom had heard the bumbling troop from a hundred yards off. When Troop 843 turned the corner and marched along a dusty trail that cut through a copse of oaks, Cobra Pack hit them from every angle. Screams shot through the air—a cloud of dust and debris rose soon after, and every scout across the battlefield could see evidence of Troop 117’s demise hanging in the air. Cobra Pack fell back, tracking into the woods, leaving the massacred troop in its deserted wake. Since then, it has remained a devastating reminder of the importance of tracking ahead of time, which Troop 459 will certainly do, led, of course by Dragon Pack—Reginald specifically. He has already been pulled off mud-packing duty to construct a full mockup of the terrain on a few pieces of loose-

leaf paper and a charcoal pencil. Given his extensive knowledge of the campgrounds, he can nearly do it by heart, which makes the process almost trivial. He descends upon the heart of the forest, to excavate it, transpose the mystery into coordinates and quantified locations.

If and when they receive location assignments, the troop assembles—all six packs (Dragon, Scorpion, Tiger, Cougar, Grizzly, and Mollusk). They stand side by side in straight lines, the Senior Eagle Scouts give a full overview of the plan: given his success the previous year, Dragon Pack has been designated arrowhead to drive the charge into the forest. After the signal is given (a scoutmaster fires a shotgun five times into the air) it is the arrowhead's responsibility to sprint the three mile distance to the hill. It's crucial that they are the first to arrive by a several minutes. This is the strategy. Each member of the Arrowhead Pack finds a place to hide on the hill, having beaten every other troop to it. They wait to ambush whichever troop is left standing on the hill at the end of the day. Although fortified, the hill offers several crevasses in the rocks and thick foliage in which a scout could easily find cover. Then the waiting game begins: Dragon Pack holds their position in perfect silence, waiting for the remaining troops to follow.

All of Dragon Pack—Riess, D.H., Reginald, Pip, Elias, and Flack—walk into the woods and collectively take a piss. Arrowhead tradition. They'll be waiting for several hours as the battle for the hill rages between the rival troops, exchanging captors. Riess smiles, watching his men relieve themselves on the same tree trunk, all standing in a semicircle, a quiet moment; there's a chorus of sighs. They buckle up, tighten their packs, and rearrange their dirt clods, making sure each one has been wrapped completely in protective newspaper before resting them in their packs. Riess has a gallon jug of water and he's pouring extra rations into each canteen—

boom! the echoing rush of a twelve-gauge shotgun sounds in the deep. Riess' clock had been completely off. He drops the water. He turns around and starts running, screaming for Reginald and the map. The rest of the pack tear after him. They leave the jug leaking water in the ground.

They're off, burning a path through the woods. It's only a few moments into the run, and their breath is already audible. Reginald has a terrific coughing fit and spits a mouthful of phlegm onto the ground. D.H.'s backpack slips off his shoulder, so he tries to grab the falling strap with his other hand, but he only throws himself off balance. He trips and catches a branch. Just as he stops, Riess comes up from behind and grabs him. D.H. rights himself and he continues the sprint.

The pack will not stop, not even to slow down. As one person starts to slow, fighting for breath, he sees that everyone else doesn't have the slightest thought to take a break. This continues in cycle, each scout having his own moment about to give in. Riess' lungs have started to burn. D.H. has fallen to the back of the formation, so he can mash on his inhaler without anyone noticing. He fights to keep the medicine in his lungs, but they demand further oxygen. Every muscle in his body burns from the rush of lactic acid. They hit a point where they've stopped noticing the pain, and they just float towards their target, almost a mile out now.

Reginald runs next to Riess and asks for a break. He firmly shakes his head—completely out of the question; once their bodies stop, they won't have the strength to reach the hill first, putting their whole effort to waste. D.H notices that Flack (or Elias) has cramped his leg, and is leaping on a single foot to keep up. The other one throws an arm around him, and they beat the remaining path together like that.

Finally, the trees clear onto a massive open field—grass stirs from the breeze. The area around the hill is like a big donut—the tree-line ends, forming a circle around the center in which the hill resides. The hill itself is covered by several trees and boulders. The clearing before the hill is the size of a few football fields, and has often proved a fatal charge for assaulting troops. Talented defenders can hurl dirt clods high in the air, and mortar the incoming enemy, completely in the open, and caught unawares.

This last section of the run is the worst: The target's in sight, but the scouts still have a large distance to cover. D.H. nearly loses consciousness, as do Elias and Flack, each having to support the other. Riess curses and urges the men along, barely able to get the words out of his mouth. They are all stumbling, almost losing balance, the ground beneath swinging out from underneath them.

When they reach the bottom of the hill, they crash into the ground. Their chests heaving, all of them coughing and wheezing. D.H. can barely breathe. His inhaler isn't enough to counter the stress that his lungs have gone through. The other scouts are no better off. Flack is nearly in tears, grabbing at his thigh which has yet to come unstuck from a brutal charlie horse.

They all lie helpless, and share a moment of vulnerability, splayed on the ground. But it's brief and fleeting. "Shit!" Riess points to the edge of clearing. Another troop was right behind them. They haven't been seen but they only have a precious few moments. Riess screams for them to get up. They scramble to regain balance.

They run for the nearest place to hide. D.H. thinks he sees an extra scout among them, but when he looks again, there's nothing there.

* * *

They've been waiting for well over an hour, and the sun isn't quite as high in the sky as it once was. Senior Eagle Scout Riess has found cover underneath a boulder at the opposite end of the hill. And for the first hour, he's had his neck lowered, putting one hell of a strain on it. He had to slowly push his legs out so that he could readjust his position underneath, all without catching the attention of the troop that occupied the hill: Troop 723 in yellow and green.

He's completely safe now, and lies on his side with his legs tucked into his body. He can see D.H. in a tree nearby. They won't be found—just as long as another troop doesn't swing around this side of the hill (climb the nearly vertical wall) and attack from there.

Troop 723 had almost caught them. One kid, the troop called Stint, had sworn that he'd seen something scurrying around the hill as they charged across the open field. He spent a few minutes snooping around the far side of the hill. But his Senior Eagle Scout called for battle-stations before he found them. They faced an initial charge: a pack had wandered halfway across the field realizing that this was the hill they were looking for. Their celebration was cut short—the defending Troop 723 launched a few dirt clods high into the air. D.H. could spot them from his position in the trees: They arced through the sky, and descended upon the unsuspecting victims. The scouts had split in every direction, screaming, a cloud of mud falling upon them, striking a few to the ground. The last of the pack took off for the tree-line yelling for the remainder of the troop, but they ran straight into an enemy position; the awaiting soldiers mopped up the routed pack with small arms fire. Silence fell across the field again. Troop 723 coordinated with their remaining packs until they'd fortified the hill to full capacity.

They find a deposit of soggy, fertile mud, so they start collecting the twigs and mud mush for further clods. Their work is sloppy and not nearly as diligent as Riess' assembly line method, so the quality will suffer.

Riess signals for D.H., a thumbs-up. D.H. nods his head and looks for Reginald. Reginald has put a large mound of leaves, grass, and dirt on himself. He's the most exposed, but he has little choice given his lanky frame; he won't fit up a tree or underneath a boulder. But he still has clear sight of D.H. and sees the signal. Reginald nods and looks for the remainder of the pack. They're all accounted for, waiting for the moment to emerge. D.H. isn't sure when this is supposed to happen.

The wind's brought a chill that shakes up the leaves around him. The branch that he's perched upon sways around. It threatens to shake him off entirely, so he wraps his arms around the thick trunk to keep himself from giving away their position. The wind picks up even more. D.H. squeezes his eyes shut, and hugs the trunk so hard that the wood feels like it's cutting into his skin. The wind howls. The branch slips from underneath his feet. He kicks his feet and his body slides down the bark. The branch snaps completely and falls to the ground. It's making one hell of a ruckus, so Senior Eagle Scout Riess unfolds his body, ready to pounce at any incoming enemy that might find him. He watches D.H. swing around the trunk and land on a lower branch, still with both his arms in a death grip around the trunk.

Two scouts from Troop 723 run over to see what's going on. The wind's completely died down and D.H. wonders, for a brief moment, if the wind had even been there in the first place. He can't keep his heart from pounding away, and his breathing has gone haywire. He reaches for his inhaler and sticks it to his teeth. He can't get any oxygen into his lungs. He's about to mash

on the inhaler, and get the good stuff inside his lungs but he sees two scouts standing just below him.

Riess has pulled himself back under the boulder, burying into the ground as far as he can. The investigating scouts look over at where his legs had just been exposed. They nearly step on Reginald's stomach, but stop just short of him. D.H. is about to lose consciousness. His breath has gotten even more shallow now. The color leaves his face. He sways on the branch. The sound of their voices fade in and out, and he thinks of sweet oxygen pouring into his lungs, if only he could plunge the asthma canister—

He sees the two scouts give up and walk away. They vanish behind a few boulders. He gasps for breath sucking all the medicine out of it that he can. Relief washes through his chest and into his fingertips. He lies against the tree, content, willing to wait for a lifetime in this tree.

He sees Troop 723's position.

Spilling over the side of the hill, a new troop charges, black and yellow bandanas clinging to their necks, a warrior's cry bellowing from within. They bring the blunt ends of their sticks down upon the heads of the defenders.

* * *

Riess gives the signal to break formation, and they emerge from hiding. The hill had been recaptured three different times, and the new Troop 748 with green and blue scarves are at half strength. D.H.'s one of the first to drop out of the tree. None of Troop 748 sees them materialize. D.H. spots someone he takes to be the Senior Eagle Scout—every square-inch of his sash is covered with buttons and badges. He pulls a dirt clod from his pack and hurls it. It's a frozen rope—the first shot of battle travels a perfectly straight line. It strikes the back of his head, the

dirt spreading around in every direction, the sticks pegging a few of the scouts standing next to him. The Senior Eagle Scout unleashes a roar, echoing across the hillside. He grabs for the back of his head and sees the dirt that's collected there. What a mess. Before he can alert the rest of the troop that's still alive, the rest of Dragon Pack launches a salvo of clods, all finding their marks on the backs of the scouts they're ambushing. The red and black bandanas emerge from the forest, bringing fire and terror with them. Few can turn around in time. Half of helpless scouts fall within the first strike and the few that avoid the flying dirt are unable to defend themselves. Reginald and Pip sprint to the remaining stragglers, put their stick-guns in their backs and take kill-shots from pointblank range. The pack unleashes the full bellicosity of teenage adolescence—at times using their sticks, not just as guns (with a trill of their tongues, emulating the sound of automatic gun fire) but also as bayonets and the butts of rifles, bringing the blunt end of it down on their heads. The whole of Troop 748 moans and complains, "Hey, stop—we're dead, okay?" but that doesn't squelch the fire in their eyes. D.H. pushes one of them and he nearly trips as he walks down the side of the hill. "Fuck you man," the dead scout says. Riess is the first to get to their green and blue flag. He tugs at the rope until it's descended entirely. He doesn't even bother to unhook it from the clips; he rips it clean off. The fabric tears easily. He throws the flag to the ground and he stamps it into the mud underneath. He hooks the red and black 459 flag into it. He hoists it high into the air and it flaps in the incoming breeze. The whole troop announce their victory. D.H. and Queeg hug one another for a few passionate seconds. They can hardly stem the excitement.

Riess swings his pack onto the ground, and pulls out a long firecracker, miraculously still intact. He motions for D.H. "Help me make a mound for it."

They push together a bunch of the mud around the base of the bottle rocket. They pack it in, tight enough to keep it there, but not so much that they break it, or keep it landlocked. D.H. smoothes out the hill with his hands to keep it solid. They spend a few minutes on this, longer than they probably should. The other members of the pack have taken positions around the edge of the hill: Reginald stands at the highest point, atop a few rocks, and from there he commands a full view of the open field. Pip stands nearby to relay any important information. The other two are at the front, sticks drawn, staring down the barrels for any other troops that might be coming their way; Queeg has already begun to dig up mud to make any last minute clods that they can.

Reiss and D.H. are finished with the launch pad. Reiss slaps a lighter in D.H.'s hand.

"You've got the honors."

D.H. nods, nervous and sweating a bit.

He flicks the wheel and the flame sprouts up. He stares at it for a little while. He almost holds his hand out to feel the heat lick his palm.

"C'mon bud, we gotta get the rest of the troop up here pronto."

D.H. puts the flame under wick and it lights and hisses. The sparks zip along the fuse and it enters the body of the rocket. It launches and explodes, making a fierce *pop* in the night sky.

"Great. Now we wait."

Reiss joins Queeg at the tarp that he's laid out. They pack together all the mud, twigs, and grass they can find around them. They scramble to make as many as they can.

Five uneasy minutes pass until the rest of the troop emerges from the tree-line and sprint towards the hill. The whole pack stands up; they mount the closest branch or boulder, and scan the field for any other troops lying in wait to ambush the incoming reinforcements.

When the rest of the troop arrive, they greet the pack with war calls and affectionate embrace. D.H. is hugged, slapped, and nuzzled by almost every member of the troop. All forty-five of them are crowded atop the hill, hugging one another, and sharing stories of what's just happened. Riess is quick to break the celebration. He orders Scorpion to set up position on the north side of the hill. They move instantly upon command, filing away, burying into the cover behind the boulders. A few of them climb the trees to get a better view. Riess takes control. He's doing he's always been meant to do: one hand clinging to a low-hanging branch and the other ushering the scouts in the direction that they need to go. His position there atop a boulder commands full view of the hill, and the scouts swarming all over it. He sees Senior Eagle Scout Jon from Tiger Pack and he's trying to tell him where to go. He's trying to get his troops to lie flat on the western side of the hill where there's the least amount of cover. But Senior Eagle Scout Jon can't hear. There are too many scouts, crowding and overflowing the hill. Riess climbs higher on the boulder and shouts his name. Louder now, but he can't hear anything above the ruckus.

D.H. watches everything in slow-motion. The scouts rush around him, trying to get to their designated spots; some yell; some follow orders; some shuffle back and forth not knowing what to do. D.H. starts to dissociate. He pulls away: the trees, the scouts, the strange little balls of mud drying in the sun; they seem so fake and strange, like he's just watching a screen onto which a back-projection is playing this whole movie.

The mud ball is larger than most. D.H. can see it rotating through the air like a capsule drifting in the zero gravity of space. It floats disembodied like that, sailing towards its target. D.H. can't yell, because Riess is yelling louder. He can't yell, because everyone around him

swallows up any noise he'll ever make. He almost has Jon's attention when the mud ball, larger than anyone's ever seen, strikes Riess in the side of his face. It catches him just as he's readjusting his feet on the boulder, so it throws his balance. He goes down like a sack of refined flour. He tries to put his hand out, catch himself on a nearby boulder, but there's nothing he can do. The commander of Troop 459 falls into the mud, taken out and murdered. The dirt mists the surrounding area. It looks like there are rocks too.

Before they can confirm the kill, another clod flies through the air and finds its target, this time in the chest of a first-year scout. He squeals, clutching his chest and feigning death. D.H. watches clods rain from every direction. The scouts scurry for cover, trying to avoid the onslaught, but they're being hit from every direction. D.H. freezes; he can't do anything more than observe the events unfolding around him. Queeg sees D.H. from the opposite side of the hill. He grabs a clod of mud from off of the mat, but it falls apart in his hands. A scout with a green and white bandana shoves a stick into Queeg's back and pulls the trigger. Queeg shakes and quivers. He reaches for his stomach, imagines the gore that'd be spraying out of it. His body starts to seize up, his shoulders twitching back and forth. His legs give out from underneath him. He falls to the ground, into the dirt and dust. He casts a dying eye toward the sky above. It's clear and cloudless. The air stirs his hair aside, tickles the peach fuzz on his cheeks. A splotch of saliva leaks out of the corner of his mouth and he goes under.

D.H. sees Reginald sprint for the tree line, but he runs into an entire squad of scouts lying in wait. Someone had beaten them to the hill before they'd even gotten there in the first place—the troop in green and white. When half of their troop stormed the hill from below, other packs had been waiting in the trees behind them. They'd gotten the final laugh. Reginald doesn't make

it very far. They peg him with clods from all directions. It's merciless. The dirt and mud cover his face, his arms, and his legs. He's hit until he can no longer run. He collapses.

Pip is the most stubborn. He's able to avoid the incoming dirt clods—barely. Some of it flecks his face. He doesn't slow down. He runs straight for one of them coming up the hill. The scouts whip out their sticks and begin firing on the charging Pip. Bullets rip through his body but Pip doesn't go down. After emptying whole clips into him, the scouts start to shout, "C'mon, I shot you like five times!" to which Pip reminds them of his bullet proof vest that he'd strapped on before the battle had begun. So the combat goes hand to hand. And Pip tries to throw a punch at one of the scouts. The scout dodges his unwieldy maneuver. He steps aside and Pip almost throws himself totally off balance. The scout grabs Pip by the shoulders, holds his stick up to his temple. Without any remorse, he pulls the trigger and drops Pip to the muddy ground below.

D.H. is the last to go. He drops his dirt clod. He throws his stick to the floor. He sees the cumulus of bodies all around him. Within a few minutes the troop in green and white bandanas has overtaken the hill and slaughtered all of Troop 459. Riess' great plan is ruined. They've gathered around D.H., their only prisoner. They hold their sticks up to his head, and the Senior Eagle Scout paces back and forth. He thinks for a minute, then looks up and nods to his firing squad. The guns all go off at once.

D.H. considers the physics of it: He imagines how all the different bullets—entering from opposing angles—would cut intersecting paths through his brain, plowing through all the neurons in there until his brain'd be ripped to pieces, the slurry of remaining matter leaking out of the entry and exit wounds; and then, D.H. would be dead.



Sports



Theater



Wood Carving

Chapter Eight

11th of November, Four Years Later: Austin High, The Fields

The football arcs over the field and for a split second blots out the morning sun. It moves until it falls again, and D.H. watches it hit its target—square in the receiver’s chest—from where he stands, behind the line of scrimmage. Every year goes faster than the one proceeding it, and during this exact moment, D.H. feels a strange sense of amnesia, like he’s been placed suddenly in a scene and everything that has happened for the past few weeks hasn’t really at all, and he feels locked in this semi-stupor of the present. The football slips out of his hand in a perfect spiral forty yards downfield; the spiral, which he’s worked with religious dedication for the past few weeks to master, hypnotizes him; then, bubbling up in his mind, comes the haze of the night before when he’s raised into the air by his arms and legs—Reginald, Pip, the wood carvings, and the long plastic tube—they shout out his name to honor the appointment to quarterback (only a sophomore too); he’s finally detached from reality now—the drug prickling his lungs has his heart in his temples; the sweat’s beading; absolutely, he’s about to die. The spiral. He’s asked the Boyfriend—or occasionally, through a grimace, calling him, “Dad,” which makes his mom almost cry—but “Dad” just laughs and says that this is what it’s like to grow up, you know, sometimes things just don’t quite click like they might have before, and D.H. thinks that he’s not really that old at all, and the Boyfriend doesn’t understand what D.H. is trying to communicate, but it’s not worth pressing because he’s kept quiet with just about everything when it comes to the Boyfriend. No exception: the time he strolls out of bed at two in the a.m. to eat out of the

refrigerator, and he catches the T.V. flashing images of a well-endowed blonde getting bent over a pool table by another inhumanly-endowed and muscular man, who act within the unmistakable boundaries of a low budget porno—mediocre lighting, digital shooting, and 80’s slap-bass background music—and D.H. says, “What the fuck?” and walks over to find the Boyfriend, who’s asleep on the couch, with the remote in his hand and his belt unbuckled. D.H. moves to the T.V., skeptical, and flicks it off; he never confronts the Boyfriend about it but he assumes the Boyfriend was awake and didn’t count on anyone coming to the kitchen at two in the a.m to catch him. (Never before has D.H. spent a portion of his morning routine staring at himself in the mirror.)

He hasn’t been to a scout meeting in over a year, and he ignored them when they called his house, but after his mother insisted, repeatedly, that he response, he agreed to meet with Scoutmaster Barrett. When he gets there, he asks after Scoutmaster Tuning, but Scoutmaster Barrett just looks at his feet, shakes his head, and says, “What a tragedy; he’s passed.” The whole session is long and protracted, wherein Scoutmaster Barrett gives his best case for the scouts: character-building, loyalty to country and troop, the foundation of virtue, but D.H. shrugs his shoulders and explains his athletic situation and the level of commitment he’s dealing with at this point, to which Scoutmaster Barrett just smiles; “You know, you ain’t little D.H. anymore. I hate to see you go, but life has other plans, doesn’t it?” to which D.H. smirks and says, “Yeah sure,” and that’s it. When he exits the front door, he notices the troop conducting opening ceremonies through the window; they stand in eight different lines, playing grab-ass with one another, and suppress their laughter while a new bugle boy goes red in the face, trying to force out a few notes

and there's Scoutmaster Barrett, his tan safari hat and his mustache, with his scouts, most of whom look painfully young.

It's mandatory for anyone who is even thinking of trying out for the football team to register for weightlifting in room 207 with Mr. Doherty who spends the majority of his time in the office behind the men's locker-room yelling at anyone who comes back to ask him a question, so when D.H. first arrives he goes straight to Mr. Doherty to find out what's going on, and orders him follow what Queeg does; D.H. hasn't heard his name in a such long time and he's taken aback. It's been three years since he's said anything to Queeg. Of course he'll see him occasionally in the hallway but if only for a few fleeting seconds before he'd look back at his feet and wait for Queeg—usually flanked by several other students—to pass him by; and so when he comes out of the locker-room for the first time, with his pale skinny legs dawdling underneath his paper-thin blue gym shorts, Queeg catches sight of him and laughs, walking over and slapping an unwelcome hand on his shoulder, squeezing it tight. “D.H.! You're here.” He guides him to the far side of the wall where, taped to the mirror, is a long sheet of white construction paper that all of them had nabbed from the janitor's closet. Written all the way down are the names of thirty or so girls, with hair color, class, and estimated weight listed next to it (loose estimation of course, given that Sally Jenkins' name reads: Sally Jenkins, Black, Soph. 754 lbs.) and all the boys stand in a heated debate: there are about five axes of analysis: tits, ass, legs, face, and feet, and each are assigned a numerical value spanning from one to ten, with one demarcating the least conceivably attractive trait, and ten being the most. The majority of the chart has been filled out, but D.H. arrives at a crucial moment: by far the biggest data point in contention is the correct numerical rating for Georgia Gerrand's ass which D.H. has gotten plenty

of time to observe in Bio class, having sat behind her for the majority of the semester, because it's already been settled for some time that she's a "butter face"—*but her* face, to be exact—meaning that the rating for "face" is far less than any other body part (legs especially); but one of the most important features had yet to be settled: her ass. D.H. provides the outsider's perspective necessary for settling such inveterate debates. D.H. approaches unwarily, and doesn't reveal (right away at least) that he has spent the majority of Bio marveling at her frame, and his nights thinking about her had helped put him to sleep. He's cautious to speak, which causes one of them to spit, "What is it D.H., you some faggot? Do we need to put Queeg's ass up on the board for you?" which made D.H. say the first thing on his mind. "It's at least a seven," and that sent half the room into an uproar, but, and, most importantly, Queeg winks at D.H., pats him on the back. "Atta' boy . . . You heard him! Put it up on the board." The boy groans and scrawls, in dark permanent marker, the number six point five in the empty box. This is his first day of weightlifting and it wins D.H. serious curry with half of the boys in the group, which is fortunate, because Queeg finds him in World History, sitting in the back row and, as easy as it sounds, D.H. has a best friend, and, even better, D.H. now exudes the fact that he's with the "in" group by the fact that he's always flanked by other people when walking out of the class; he starts wearing designer jeans (after begging his mother) and he sports button-up Polo shirts, which his mother can only afford by scouring the aisles of the discount rack in Kohl's. D.H. shuffles in tow, dragging his feet all over the floor. His mother doesn't do it out of charity, but uses it like a bartering chip, i.e. that she will take him shopping but under the single condition that he joins her and the Boyfriend at church on Sundays, a deal that D.H. almost rejects out of hand, but after he recalls Queegs disapproval of his fashion choices, he agrees to tag along. It's

something about which he has become increasingly self-aware: his appearance, especially considering that he has fourth period with Amber Hadley, the one upon whom he has fixed his gaze: her curly red hair, and the sweet breasts that her bra conveniently presses together for the whole hallway to admire, so that even Mr. Stevenson, the hall monitor gets his fill, and D.H. catches him gazing down the dark crevasse of her cleavage every time she passes by; and so, spending an afternoon in a stuffy aisle of church for one day seems well worth the trouble, but even then, every aspect of being in that church is a complete bore, and it drags him ever closer to sweet lull of sleep. D.H. slumps down and lays his head on the smooth wood and stares at the intricate patterns that the stained-glass windows make on the wall. The inside is cavernous. Massive. The crucifixion of Jesus is etched into the glass, progressing from one station of the cross to the next. The sunlight's been stained red from his blood and Pontius Pilate points an outstretched finger towards everyone below, the varied and intersecting lines of a whip dug into Jesus' back. D.H. has never noticed these in much detail but they're actually kind of disturbing. He'll forget it soon enough when they shuffle through the church doors and join his friends to play a pick-up game at the fields, but he's quietly disturbed: the Boyfriend jabs his shoulder and snaps him out of it. He joins the line of people waiting to greet the pastor for their daily blessing, everyone's head bowed, mumbling to themselves and making signs of the cross upon their foreheads, which D.H. mimics, a reminder to the stained-glass stations above him that begin to paint the inside of the church an increasingly brilliant array of colors from the sun climbing higher in the sky, and through the veneer of colored glass, D.H. can barely make it out, like the Tuesday that will follow, gripping the football in his hands and squinting through the light of the setting sun, landing the ball square in the chest of the intended receiver, Jeffrey, whom he has

initiated into the team, a few days previous, when he corners him in the locker room after the rest of the team has already shuffled off onto the field, howling and punching each other in the ribs. D.H. had followed for a few moments, then turned upon Jeffrey and stopping him as he's about to run off. D.H. places an arm on the locker, blocking his way out. Jeffrey moves in the other direction but D.H. leans that way making it absolutely clear where he's supposed to be. Jeffrey smiles at first but D.H. doesn't react; he remains silent. "Are you going to—" D.H. shakes his head, and grabs the buckle of his pants. A realization sweeps over Jeffrey's face, so he undoes the buckle of his pants as quick as possible, fidgets with the buttons, until his pants have slid down to his thighs. D.H. does the same in turn and they inspect one another. D.H. affects a few noises of approbation, and then for a few seconds, disapprobation and disapproval. Jeffrey reacts: his face slackens and his smile fades, but D.H. nods again, taking a few mental notes. He pulls up his pants, and turns from Jeffrey to run onto the field. Jeffrey stands a bit transfixed by the moment, unsure whether to follow or revel in the moment for a little while longer, but he snaps out of it and follows D.H. into the huddle they've formed on the sideline. Queeg says, "It's a Tuesday game. We all know what's going on and what we have to do. ONE TWO THREE," and the team shouts back, "ONE TWO THREE." "D.H., c'mere. I've known this bastard for, what, five years now? It's been so long. Scrawny D.H. Couldn't talk to a girl if you paid him a million bucks—could barely lift a football! Look at him now!" The team cheers in assent. "The goddamn quarterback now. You all better listen to him. He's a got a goddamn howitzer for an arm. Deadly. We're gonna blow this wide open. How about it D.?" D.H. looks around at his team, huddled like that, and he notices how many there are. Sweat gathers—it feels like his wind pipe is gonna close up, so he has to swallow real hard before he can say anything and even then it's just, "Right,"

and nothing more. He's silent and Queeg looks on, waiting for him to say something more and the rest of the team starts to get a bit jittery. Then Queeg laughs, and the rest of the team follows. "I guess some things don't change," Queeg says. "Let's go." The team, arm in arm, begin to bounce back and forth chanting, "Ah ah AUSTIN; ah ah AUSTIN HIGH," over and over, building to a loud crescendo and they all break formation, and run across the field for scrimmage, and now that D.H. is first string, he leads the rest of the starting team, calling the plays. Center line takes turns snapping the ball, some of which go flying over D.H.'s head and split the upright. D.H. gets a strong feel for the ball: the stitches beneath his fingertips and the satisfaction of hurling it over the defensive line, watching the ball twirl out of his hands and into a perfect spiral, leading it ahead of the receiver; he runs little subconscious math equations to figure the physics of it all, especially when he runs a hail mary pass, and hurls it fifty yards downfield; every player—even the part of his team acting as the opponent—watches its trajectory across the field in a parabolic motion finding its terminus in the anticipating hands of a receiver: a wide-eyed and incredulous freshman who falls into the plush grass of the end zone.

The team erupts. "Jesus, what an arm." Queeg jogs over to D.H. "I'm glad you found your calling, my friend." D.H. punches Queeg in the arm. "Fuck you." Queeg laughs. "Ah fuck you too." He tackles D.H. to the ground and pins his arms beneath his knees. "Got you!" D.H. squirms and can't get free. He lifts a knee and jabs it into Queeg's back. "Christ!" Queeg rolls over, but not fast enough; D.H. is upon him. Now his knees are on Queeg's arms. He tries to kick D.H. too, dig a knee into his back, but he can't land a blow. D.H. has him totally pinned. D.H. rips off his helmet and the whole team surrounds them. He tosses it aside, leaving his hair a wiry mess. Red indentations from the helmet line his face. He leans over Queeg who's struggling even

more to escape. His face is directly above his. D.H. purses his lips. He dangles a yellowish loogie from his mouth. It spins and dangles by a thin rope of saliva. Queeg screams. He bucks D.H. like a bull, but that only makes the loogie bounce and loosen its grip. It's at the point of no return, where D.H. can suck it up no longer. Queeg makes brief eye-contact with D.H. for the split-second before it falls. It lands square on his forehead. "Motherfucker!" D.H. laughs and steps off him. Queeg is totally helpless. He tries to run to the bench to wash it off, but the whole team has him trapped. It drips into his eyes, so Queeg has to keep them squeezed shut. The team is in hysterics. They imitate Queeg's plight—closing their eyes and faking his voice. After realizing that there's no immediate escape from the circle, Queeg falls to the ground and wipes the slime onto the grass—but this only leaves a mud smear across his cheek. He can open his eyes, but it's only to bear witness to his embarrassment. D.H. steps back into the circle, finds his helmet on the ground. He pulls it over his head and yells, "Back to scrimmage! What the hell are you doing?" At that, they disperse from the circle and get back into formation.

He spends the next day molding the shape of his body into the couch. The Boyfriend occasionally drops in to make conversation, but D.H. doesn't respond. He's drifting in and out of sleep. The Boyfriend has to shake him to get his attention. "Listen D.H.—it's important. Your mother only wants me to stay somewhere else for a few weeks. It's not permanent or anything, but look." He gets down on his haunches and pulls a business card from his pocket. "If you can't get me on my cell, you can reach my office phone, okay?" D.H. takes it from his outstretched hand and crumbles it into a little ball. He lets it fall in between the cushions of the couch and he closes his eyes again. "You little fuck. Why did you do that?" D.H. shrugs and tries to roll over. The Boyfriend grabs him by the shoulder and his knuckles go white. D.H.'s eyes flash open. The

Boyfriend is almost crying, and he's shaking. "You always hated me, right? Admit it!" He tightens his grip on D.H.'s shoulder and his nails dig into his skin. D.H. tries to clamber out of the couch, but he can't get away. "I'm better than your deadbeat father. I've tried so hard . . ." He trails off. He lets go of D.H. and turns away. He slams the door on his way out. D.H.'s heart is racing. He falls back into the couch and can't control his breathing. It's as if the air has been sapped of all its oxygen. He runs his hands through his hair; he feels the panic ripple through his veins. But eventually, it passes.

He flips the channels until he finds one with guns, soldiers, and tanks. It looks like it's from World War Two: a group of soldiers huddle together outside a caved-in house. There is rubble all over the streets and snow covers everything. Before D.H. slips off into sleep, he sees a bullet rip through one of the soldiers' necks. He collapses on the ground and bleeds all over the snow. The men run in every direction to avoid the *ping!* of the sniper's bullet. It ricochets off the metal and the concrete around them. A medic runs to save the soldier, but a bullet tears through the medic's leg. All the men point their rifles toward the incoming bullets, snuff out the hidden assassin. D.H. dreams that he's running through the fields at Austin High; they're covered in snow and he's in full PT gear. Queeg is next to him carrying his rifle and D.H. too. They run like that, carrying full gear through the snow-covered fields.

In the night, he waits until his mom has fallen asleep, then he pushes open the window to his room. The cool air wafts inside, and he puts one foot out before the other. After departing he walks out into the street and revels in a new-found freedom, passing through a darkness which is occasionally punctuated by the dull light of a streetlamp, and his walk turns into a half-jog by the time he's gotten where he needs to go—Queeg's house. It's been left entirely to Queeg's own

keeping. He's never been outside and alone in the streets at this time of night. It's totally quiet, so much that D.H. tries to curb his breath, but he can't help it: the excitement is palpable. He cuts through the fields to get to Queeg's place faster.

He hears the music before he even sees the house. He rounds the corner. There are a few people on the porch smoking and every light inside has been turned on. He nods to the people on the porch but they don't notice him. He opens the door. The sound and smell hit him at once. It's sour and stuffy. He detects a heavy concentration of B.O. underneath it all. The music is so loud that he can't hear himself talk. He shouts Queeg's name until a girl understands and points him up the staircase. It's where half of the party has gathered.

He squeezes into the Queeg's room, where there are people stuffed wall to wall, and Queeg's in the corner with a large tube, sucking smoke out of one end, then blowing it up into the air and when he's done he passes it to the kid sitting to his direct left. He hails D.H. from the other room, and shouts his name, so D.H. shoulders his way through a knot of people he's never seen before—he's already begun to feel lightheaded from the room; it's a nightmare for any claustrophobe. The last of the air has been replaced by a dense fog of smoke. D.H. sees arrowheads lined against the wall; there's Queeg's old scout sash, covered with merit badges. He finds Queeg who shows him the kind of affection he's never seen from him before: both arms around his shoulders, shouting his name into his ear; his eyes look like they've gone limp. D.H. nods vigorously. "Big game tomorrow," Queeg exclaims. Time stretches out. A girl has the long tube in her hand and she sits on D.H.'s lap. She places a hand on his shoulder, lays her head against his, and puts the tube right into his mouth. D.H. breathes in, and she begins to laugh and shake her head. "Wait." She lights a little bowl of weed below and smoke fills the tube, tainted

purple by the color of the plastic, and that's when D.H. takes a deep breath. It's not too long after that that that he slips into amnesia, and the room, with everyone in it crowds around him, piling in. A wall of bodies; and realizes that he's stuck inside in his head for good, no matter how much he'll try to retreat; everything he's ever known and experienced has been inside of *him*. The claustrophobia of it all really grips him; and even when they lift him into the air and shout his name over and over until it doesn't mean anything any more, he's detached; he watches Queeg pull a knife from his pocket and dangle it in the air; there's Reginald and Pip admiring him and he sees Scoutmaster Barrett standing atop Barrett auditorium in Garner Park and he tells all the eager scouts gazing up at him, "Be not just a scout, but be a man."

Acknowledgements

The author herewith acknowledges the generous and broad-minded support of

Dr. Edwin Julius Rivers

The Late David Foster Wallace

Fellow Thesis Survivor, Ms. Caitlin Caviness

Shannon Ridge Petite Sirrah Wine

The Staff and Management of Denny's 24-Hour Family Restaurant, Boulder CO

without whom, this thesis would not have been possible.

